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DISABILITY AND COLLEGE CHOICE:

A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE COLLEGE APPLICATION EXPERIENCES

OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Dissertation

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Disability and College Choice: A Narrative Inquiry into the College Application

Experiences of Students with Disabilities

by

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ABSTRACT

Although a college degree is an increasingly important gateway to economic advancement in the United States, high school students with disabilities enroll in postsecondary education at lower rates than nondisabled students. The disparities in college access for these students indicate that there may be differences in how they are navigating the college choice process, or the process of deciding whether and where to go to college, in comparison to their nondisabled peers. In order to better understand how students with disabilities make college-related decisions, this narrative inquiry examined the college choice experiences of three high school students with disabilities. Using a disability studies lens and a conceptualization of college choice that combines models proposed by Perna (2006) and Webb (2000), I studied both how students navigated the pre-matriculation stages of college choice as well as how their understanding of disability and their experiences with special education impacted their choice processes.

This narrative inquiry is presented as three stories of college choice, one for each participant, and is based on semi-structured conversations and observations with participants as they worked on their college applications over the course of the 2022-

2023 academic year. The narrative themes from participants' stories suggest that students' understanding of disability and their academic experiences in school, including experiences with receiving special education services, shaped their student identities and influenced their processes for deciding to pursue postsecondary education, exploring and selecting college options, and completing college applications. Factors such as parental involvement, career aspirations, and school resources, which are traditionally thought to be important in the college choice process, were also important for my participants. Implications from this research include finding ways to build accessible college-related supports into the secondary school curriculum, normalizing special education in school communities, and identifying places where application forms and admissions processes are impeding students' success.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Since the shift towards a more global, knowledge-based economy in the latter half of the twentieth century, a college degree has become increasingly important for economic opportunity in the United States. Job opportunities for adults who have some postsecondary education, especially a bachelor's degree, have increased steadily while the share of jobs that require a high school diploma or less has decreased significantly over time (Carnevale et al., 2016, 2018). Adults who complete a bachelor's degree or higher also generally earn more than adults with less education (Carnevale et al., 2021; Ma & Pender, 2023) and have lower rates of unemployment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Data on Americans with disabilities, a population who has been historically excluded from many job opportunities (Nielsen, 2012), suggests a similar relationship between postsecondary educational attainment and economic opportunity. Research has found that rates of employment and wages are higher for postsecondary graduates among Autistic individuals (Whittenburg et al., 2019) and individuals with learning disabilities (Madaus, 2006), and that gaps in the employment rate between disabled and nondisabled individuals decrease as levels of educational attainment increase (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). This data suggests that earning a postsecondary credential provides important access to job opportunities and economic advancement for disabled people in the United States.

Despite the benefits to participating in postsecondary education, high school students with disabilities do not enroll in postsecondary programs at the same rate as their nondisabled peers. Although there have been recent increases in high school graduation rates among students with disabilities (Lyerly, 2023), disabled students continue to have

lower graduation rates than the U.S. average (71% compared to 87%; NCES, 2021), and students who receive special education services in high school are less likely to be enrolled in postsecondary education after four years of high school (63% compared to 83%) than their peers (Hinz et al., 2017). Among those who do matriculate to postsecondary education, students with disabilities are less likely to attend four-year institutions (26% compared to 54%), to be enrolled in a bachelor's degree program (41% compared to 52%), and to attend a moderately or highly selective university compared to their nondisabled peers (26% compared to 37%; Hinz et al., 2017). They are also more likely to undermatch for college, meaning that they often attend less selective colleges than their academic abilities would suggest that they are capable of attending (Hudes & Aquino, 2019). These differences in the ways that students with disabilities access postsecondary education are mirrored in their postsecondary outcomes, with about 40 percent of disabled students completing a postsecondary credential within six years of enrollment compared to approximately 51 percent of nondisabled students (Hinz et al., 2017).

These differences in college access and success for disabled students are the legacy of a long history of exclusion from institutions of higher education in the United States (Dolmage, 2017). Although anti-discrimination and disability rights legislation in the last fifty years have improved disabled individuals' educational opportunities at all levels, disparities in access to higher education between disabled and nondisabled students clearly still exist. Moreover, these students make up a significant portion of the public school population; in the 2021-22 academic year 7.3 million students, comprising 15 percent of the total public school population ages 3 – 21, received special education

services through their schools for physical, neurological, developmental, or other disabilities (NCES, 2023). Among the secondary school population, data suggests that as many as 22 percent of ninth graders start high school with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and receive special education services (Hinz et al., 2017). The data on postsecondary access and success for disabled and nondisabled students suggests that somewhere along their educational pathways, students with disabilities are being left behind.

Statement of the Problem

The gaps in college access between disabled and nondisabled students suggest that there may be significant differences in the high school experiences of these students in relation to the process of deciding whether and where to go to college, often referred to as the college choice process. Aspects of college choice include students' predisposition and preparation for college, their search for and application to college, and their matriculation decisions, all of which are influenced by a student's personal characteristics and social contexts (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). In terms of predisposition, students who receive special education services in high school are less likely than their peers to expect to enroll in or complete college (Cheatham & Elliott, 2013; Hinz et al., 2017), and some research suggests that the college aspirations of students with disabilities may actually decline over the course of high school (Hitchings et al., 2005). Several studies have also shown that students with disabilities are less likely to take and complete a college preparatory curriculum in high school (Hitchings et al., 2005; Shifrer et al., 2013). In terms of college search, application, and matriculation decisions, there is very little research on how disabled students navigate these processes. Without this

information, it is difficult to pinpoint how various personal characteristics and social or environmental factors may be contributing to the gaps in college access for students with disabilities.

In order to better understand the gap in college access between disabled and nondisabled students, researchers need to center the perspectives and experiences of students with disabilities as they navigate college-related decisions. Webb (2000) suggests that disabled students move through five stages of college choice: (1) deciding whether to pursue postsecondary education; (2) exploring postsecondary options; (3) selecting institutions that match their interests and needs; (4) applying to colleges; and (5) enrolling in postsecondary education. Using this model of the college choice process helps to identify some of the unknowns: What are the factors that disabled students take into account when deciding whether or not to apply to college? How do they find information about college options and select institutions to which to apply? What processes do they follow to complete and submit applications, and what resources do they use? How do influential adults (parents, teachers, counselors, etc.) and peers impact their college choice experiences throughout all of these stages?

Additionally, there is virtually no research that examines how being labeled with a disability through the education system impacts the college choice experiences of students who receive special education services. Applying social and cultural models of disability to the issue of differential college access leads to questions about how educational institutions, systems, and cultural attitudes around disability define what is considered normal for academic learning in school environments and, in the process, create barriers for disabled students. Through this lens, it is important to understand how

students with disabilities experience special education and how schools may be influencing the opportunities of students who have been labeled with a disability, especially in relation to the college choice process. In particular, how do disabled students understand the influence of a disability label on their educational experiences related to college choice, and what environmental and social factors might be impacting these students as they make decisions about college?

Theoretical Underpinnings

My approach to studying the role of disability within the college choice process draws from social and cultural models of disability. The social model of disability positions disability as a social construct that encompasses the social problems that disabled people face as a result of "disabling environments," or the social barriers and social exclusion imposed on them by society (Barnes, 2012; Shakespeare, 2013). In this way, disability is distinct from the idea of impairment, or physical limitation, and the social model shifts the focus of disability from medical intervention and individualized pathology to the larger social barriers that prevent disabled people from fully participating in society (Barnes, 2012; Shakespeare, 2013). Moreover, the social model asserts that disabled people are an oppressed group in society and "places the moral responsibility on society to remove the burdens which have been imposed" on disabled people (Shakespeare, 2013, p. 217).

Cultural models of disability go beyond the social model's focus on structural barriers and exclusion to question the relationship between disability and cultural values, beliefs, and expectations (Waldschmidt, 2017). For this dissertation, I use the cultural model of disability as defined by Waldschmidt (2017), who describes culture broadly as

"the totality of 'things' created and employed by a particular people or a society" (p. 24), including institutions, objects, values, ideas, social attitudes and behaviors, and narratives. According to Waldschmidt, the cultural model of disability suggests that disability is constructed discursively and experientially through the cultural creation of normative categories, with disability as a signifier of an embodied expression of deviance from what is considered normal and healthy within a specific cultural context. Thus disability only exists as a means of differentiation situated within the power structures and social-historical context of a particular culture, and the cultural model focuses not just on the individual with disabilities but rather on the social and cultural context that creates disability through denormalization.

Recognizing disability as a social and cultural construct that is produced and lived through educational institutions and processes, I use these ideas to question the ways that social barriers, exclusion, and the cultural denormalization of disability inform students' understandings of disability and their narratives in relation to college choice as they navigate the college application process. Combining these models of disability also helps me to consider both how social environments shape individuals' experiences and how cultural notions of normalcy and deviance are constructed by and reaffirmed through school processes. This theoretical approach also shapes the reason that I define disability broadly for the purposes of this study and use the identification of disability through the education system as a means of sampling participants.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative research is to gain a deeper understanding of how high school students with disabilities approach and navigate decisions around applying to

college, including whether to apply to college, to which colleges to apply, and how to complete various steps in the application process. This research also questions the role of disability as a social and cultural construct and the impact of special education environments on disabled students as they navigate the stages of college choice. In order to explore these topics, this study will focus on the lived experiences of disabled high school students through the first four stages of the college choice process as defined by Webb (2000) in order to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of disabled high school students as they navigate the college choice process through the stages of deciding whether or not to attend college, exploring postsecondary options, selecting institutions to which to apply, and completing college applications?

2. How do disabled high school students' understandings of disability and experiences receiving special education services shape their college choice processes?

Definition of Terms

Disability

Disability is not easily defined, and different researchers and professionals may define disability through medical, social, historical, political, or cultural lenses. Given my theoretical underpinnings in the social and cultural models of disability, I focus on the social and cultural processes for labeling disability through the school system rather than on medical definitions of what constitutes impairment, disease, or chronic illness. Thus for this research, the category of students with disabilities includes any student who has been labeled with a physical, neurological, developmental, emotional or other disability

through school special education processes. These processes are a product of sociocultural beliefs and values about what is normal in school environments and typically rely on medical diagnoses in relation to perceived educational deficits, physical or developmental impairments, or some other medical deviancy (Connor & Olander, 2020; Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014).

Additionally, throughout this research I use the terms "students with disabilities" and "disabled students" interchangeably, except where an individual has expressed a preferred terminology for referring to their disability identity. I do this to acknowledge that some people with disabilities may prefer person-first language, while other disabled people prefer disability-first language. Linton (1998) suggests that the former use of terminology maintains disability as a characteristic rather than a defining variable, whereas the latter highlights disability as a marker of collective identity. I am a person who does not identify as disabled, and I defer to the preferences of people with disabilities in how they choose to express their disability identity. When citing research and other literature, I use the terminology employed by the authors in hope that they have also accounted for the preferences of disabled participants. Additionally, I use the terminology "nondisabled" in reference to people without disabilities, which Linton (1998) suggests as a way to strategically center disability and to highlight that being nondisabled is not a neutral or objective stance, but rather exists in relation to disability and the social meaning ascribed to disability status.

Special Education

Special education encompasses the specially designed instruction and related educational services that students receive if they have been identified with a disability in

accordance with the regulations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA is an entitlement law that guarantees a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to students with specific disabilities. Special education, provided under IDEA, is distinct from Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, which is civil rights legislation that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities. While special education must be provided to students who are determined to have one of the 13 disabilities identified in IDEA, students are eligible for a 504 plan if they have any "physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more life activities" (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2020, para. 31). Thus some students who are not eligible for special education because they are not identified with one of the disabilities identified in IDEA may still be eligible for 504 plans. As a result of this distinction, participants in this research will be students who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) under IDEA and will not include students who have 504 plans, unless they also receive special education services under IDEA and have an IEP.

College Choice

College choice refers to the process by which individuals make decisions about attending postsecondary education. This includes the decision of whether or not to continue education after secondary school as well as decisions about what type of college a student hopes to attend and, after gaining admission, which college to attend. The college choice process is influenced by an individual's personal characteristics and social contexts, including other people, physical environments, and institutions (Hossler &

Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). The specific models of college choice that inform this dissertation will be discussed in detail in the literature review.

Narrative

In its simplest form, a narrative is a story. Using a narrative inquiry research methodology, I use the term narrative to describe both the stories that people tell and the stories that people live (Clandinin, 2013), including the research story that I will live out with my participants of how disability and college choice intersect. The key elements of narrative within narrative inquiry are time (temporality), personal and social contexts (sociality), and place. These three narrative commonplaces inform how I will approach all aspects of the research process, including data collection, analysis, and writing the final research text.

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Significance and Overview of the Study

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In the past few decades, educators and policy makers in the United states have amplified their focus on college access and success. However, there has been less focus on the college-related experiences of disabled students, despite the notable differences in postsecondary enrollment for students who receive special education services in high school. Without a better understanding of how disabled students think about and make decisions about college, educators risk continuing to let a significant portion of high school students slip through the cracks and miss valuable opportunities for postsecondary education. By exploring the experiences of three disabled high school students as they navigated the college choice process, this study sheds light on the strategies that these students use to achieve success in this process as well as the challenges that they face. The stories that are shared here are meant to provide insights for students and families

into what the college choice process might look like for them, and to prompt educators to reflect on the ways that we engage with students who have been labeled with disabilities and how our educational practices and systems can be used to empower, or alternatively impede, these students in the college choice process.

The next two chapters of this dissertation provide the context for this study. Chapter two provides a discussion of the literature that informs my research puzzle, including an overview of several significant college choice models, factors impacting college choice for students with disabilities, and background on the ways that understandings of disability and special education programs have developed and evolved in the American school system. Chapter two also discusses the theoretical underpinnings of this work, which is rooted in social and cultural conceptualizations of disability as informed by the field of disability studies. Chapter three provides an overview of the narrative inquiry method that was used, as well as a personal narrative reflecting my past experiences with disability in educational spaces ("Narrative Beginnings") and a description of the research site ("Place"). Chapters four, five, and six each chronicle the college choice story of one of my student participants, and chapter seven discusses the narrative themes that ran through and across these students' stories of college choice. This final chapter also suggests implications for educators based on the findings.

This dissertation is meant to be read and understood as a story of the real-life experiences of three students who navigated the college choice process in unique but also relatable ways. While college choice is the focal point of the stories that are shared here, it was only one small part of the larger stories that these students were living as friends, siblings, children, students, and emerging adults during the course of their senior year of

high school. I encourage readers to try to imagine these stories, and live alongside these students as they move through their college choice processes. I also hope that you will make space as you read to imagine new possibilities for what school and college choice can mean for students and for educators.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE

The story of a student's experience with college choice starts long before the final year of high school. Decisions about whether to go to college and how to approach the college application process are shaped by personal situation, parental expectations, academic experiences, and the related social and cultural contexts that inform each step of students' educational journeys, beginning from their very first encounters with school. While ideas about ability and average levels of content mastery shape all students' school experiences, the school stories of students with identified disabilities are shaped by an additional layer of context in relation to their experiences with disability labeling and special education. In order to more deeply understand these students' experiences, it is important to understand the ways that disability has been socially and culturally positioned in the United States as well as the historical context of special education in the American school system. In the context of this dissertation, several models of disability from the field of disability studies are relevant to interpreting experiences of disability in contemporary American society and provide the theoretical underpinnings for understanding how students' experiences with disability impact their college choice processes. Following the discussion of disability studies and its application to educational contexts, I review a brief history of the evolution of ideas about disability in the United States and the evolution of the American special education system, both of which are relevant to the ways that disabled students experience schooling. This chapter then examines several models of college choice that are key to the research questions and explicates some of the ways that students with disabilities may experience the college choice process differently from their nondisabled peers as a result of their disability label.

Theoretical Underpinnings in Disability Studies

Narrative inquiry as a methodology suggests that researchers begin their work by drawing from the experiences of the researcher and participants rather than from a theoretical framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). However, a key piece of this process is for researchers to critically reflect on their own narratives and understanding of the topic of inquiry. Thus it is important to acknowledge the theoretical underpinnings in the field of disability studies that inform my dissertation work.

Disabled scholar Tobin Siebers (2008) describes disability studies as a field that examines:

> the social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability identity and asks how they relate to enforced systems of exclusion and oppression, attacking the widespread belief that having an able body and mind determines whether one is a quality human being. (pp. 3–4)

As an interdisciplinary field, disability studies addresses a broad range of topics, including "issues such as autonomy, competence, wholeness, independence/dependence, health, physical appearance, aesthetics, community, and notions of progress and perfection" (Linton, 1998, p. 118). Early ideas in disability studies emerged from the work of disabled activists in the mid-twentieth century as they strove to redefine the meaning of disability as a social and political rather than a medical problem, arguing that disabled people were marginalized and oppressed due to their disability status (Roulstone et al., 2012). While early concerns of disability studies scholars focused on the economic marginalization and political oppression of disabled people, the field evolved over time to consider the broader social and cultural implications of ableism and disability across

disciplines and in different international contexts (Roulstone et al., 2012). Disability

studies scholars have worked to problematize the disabled/nondisabled binary, question

the idea of normalcy, and explore the intersections of disability and other social identities

(Davis, 2013; Roulstone et al., 2012; Shildrick, 2012). To this end disability studies

activists and scholars have proposed both social and cultural models of disability as

alternatives to traditional medical conceptualizations of disability.

Social and Cultural Models of Disability

My approach to studying the role of disability within the college choice process

draws on the social model and cultural models of disability. The social model of

disability as conceptualized by British disability activists has been foundational to the

field of disability studies, while cultural models of disability add an important lens to

understanding disability as a product of culture and to problematize the concept of

normalcy. Taken together, these models illustrate how social and cultural narratives about

disability are formed over time and how they are challenged through conceptualizations

of disability as social/cultural constructs. As subfields of disability studies, Disability

Studies in Education (DSE) and Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit) provide

insight into the manifestation of social and cultural constructs of disability in educational

spaces and explore how these constructs intersect with students' racial identities. Given

its central role in the founding of disability studies as a field, I first consider the tenets of

the social model of disability and the critiques that have extended from this model as the

field of disability studies has grown.

The Social Model of Disability

While the term "social model" was coined by the disabled activist Mike Oliver in the early 1980s, the ideas behind the social model of disability originated earlier in the social and political activism of disabled people in the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1960s and 1970s (Barnes, 2012; Shakespeare, 2013). In particular, the political work of the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in Britain in the 1970s helped to define the social model. UPIAS was founded by disabled activists in part as a rejection of the physical segregation of disabled people into institutions run by medical professionals that limited the independence and economic opportunity of disabled inhabitants (Barnes, 2012). The early founders of UPIAS established the goal of "replac[ing] segregated facilities with opportunities for people with impairments to participate fully in society, to live independently, to undertake productive work and to have full control over their own lives" (Shakespeare, 2013, p. 214). As originally conceptualized by its British founders, the social model was rooted in materialist perspectives, focusing on the ways that disabled people were economically marginalized by capitalist processes that distinguished able-bodied and disabled workers (Barnes, 2012). Around the same time that UPIAS was laying the foundations for the social model in Britain, disability rights activism in the United States prompted the start of the Independent Living Movement (ILM), which had congruent goals to UPIAS in arguing for disabled people to be more fully included in society and to have more agency in controlling their own affairs (Barnes, 2012).

Two key tenets of the social model emerged from the activism of its founders. First, the social model emphasizes a distinction between individual impairment and the concept of "disability," which encompasses the problems that disabled people face due to

the barriers and exclusion imposed on them by society (Barnes, 2012; Shakespeare, 2013). This distinction does not deny the importance of individual intervention in relation to impairment, but rather shifts the focus from the individual to the larger social context in which disabled people are marginalized and excluded due to social barriers (Barnes, 2012). Secondly, the social model asserts that disabled people are an oppressed group due to these social barriers and exclusions (Shakespeare, 2013). It also places the onus on society rather than on the individual disabled person to remove the social barriers that exclude disabled people in order to end their oppression (Shakespeare, 2013). Terminology is also important in the social model, where the term "disabled people" is preferred to demonstrate that people are disabled by society rather than innately disabled due to individual impairments (Shakespeare, 2013). While disability activists in both the U.K. and the U.S. advocated for the full social inclusion of disabled people, the social model in the U.K. was developed with clearer distinctions between disability and impairment and a focus on social-political oppression, whereas the version of the social model that developed in the U.S., sometimes called the "minority group model," was influenced by the American civil rights movement and focused more on the social construction of disability (Connor et al., 2008; Gabel, 2005).

The social model provides a sharp contrast to the idea of a 'medical model' of disability, which is typically the terminology used to refer to the ways that disability has been conceptualized through a medical lens. The medical model equates disability with impairment or disease, viewing disability as pathology and something to be treated or cured in order to reestablish a sense of medical normalcy (DasGupta, 2015). In direct contrast to the social model, medical models position disability as individual deficit and

tragedy, ignoring the social conditions that oppress disabled people (Linton, 1998). Such conceptualizations of disability have historical roots in the social devaluing of disabled people as a result of industrialization and eugenics in the 1800s and early 1900s (DasGupta, 2015). Disability activists often argue that medical understandings of disability deny agency to disabled people, subjugating them to medical professionals and "forcing many individuals with disabilities to acquiesce to diagnostic categorizations to receive work-related benefits, insurance coverage, access to therapies, rehabilitation, or prosthetic and mobility-related equipment" (DasGupta, 2015, p. 121). Medicalized views of disability have also been viewed as a barrier to the promotion of disability as diversity since disability is viewed as medically abnormal and undesirable, and thus difficult to celebrate or normalize under neoliberal conceptualizations of diversity (Davis, 2015). For these reasons, disability studies scholars and proponents of the social model generally try to distance themselves from medical conceptualizations of disability.

Although the social model has been critical in advancing the disability rights movement, there are a number of relevant critiques of the social model among disability studies scholars and disabled activists. One major criticism is that by minimizing the role of impairment, the social model minimizes the lived experiences of disabled people for whom impairment is a major part of their everyday lives (Shakespeare, 2013). In attempting to distance themselves from medical views of disability, many disability studies scholars also fail to acknowledge the important role that medicine plays in the lives of some disabled people (Linker, 2013; Wendell, 2013). For disabled people who suffer from chronic illness, pain, or other severe psychological or physical health issues, their experience with impairment may impact every aspect of their lives and impose

limitations on them that social justice policies alone will not remedy (Wendell, 2013). People who are "unhealthy disabled" in these ways may indeed be seeking a cure for their impairment, "not as a substitute for curing ableism, but in addition to it" (Wendell, 2013, p. 162). To this point, Linker (2013) argues that "[w]hile disability cannot (and should not) be reduced to disease, the fact remains that some forms of disability are brought about by disease processes, and some require daily regimes of home health care, therapy, and pain management" (p. 502). The distinction between disability and impairment also overlooks the fact that the impacts of impairment and the effects of social barriers are closely entwined and often hard to separate in disabled people's lived experience (Shakespeare, 2013). Shakespeare (2013) argues that to consider one without the other fails to account for the complexity of living with disability. Furthermore, removing all social barriers for all disabled people would be difficult to accomplish, given that disabled people with different impairments may prefer different and potentially contradicting solutions (Shakespeare, 2013). These critiques suggest a need for the social model to consider ways to reconcile the role of medicine and the lived experiences of impairment with the model's focus on socially disabling environments.

Another critique of the social model is that its foundational focus around the oppression and exclusion of people with physical disabilities has left questions about how people with learning difficulties fit into its framework (Stalker, 2012). Stalker (2012) argues that while people with learning difficulties may be more likely to face information barriers than material barriers to their full participation in society, they similarly experience exclusion, discrimination, and negative attitudes "that range from being patronized or pitied to harassment and hate crime" (p. 124). Moreover, people with

learning difficulties may experience discrimination from other disabled people or within the field of disability studies itself, based on the idea of a "hierarchy of impairments" (Stalker, 2012, p. 125) in which other disabled people wish to disassociate themselves from people with learning difficulties to avoid having their intellectual capacity questioned. The promotion of a positive collective disability identity may also be at odds with the preferences of people with learning difficulties, who may be more likely to focus on their personal experiences with disability and to highlight their "shared humanity" with nondisabled people in order to minimize their stigmatization (Stalker, 2012, p. 125). These differences, along with the minimization of impairment as discussed above, demonstrate how the social model may not be conducive to promoting the goals of disabled people across the spectrum of disability identities and impairments.

An additional critique of the social model is that its materialist emphasis on economic barriers and exclusion does not fully capture the social challenges that disabled people face (Shildrick, 2012). Shildrick (2012) contends that such a perspective does not address "the underlying attitudes, values and subconscious prejudices and fears that ground a persistent, albeit often unspoken, intolerance" of disability (p. 35). Removing all of the economic barriers for disabled people, she argues, will not completely eliminate the marginalization of disabled people because their oppression is not only economic in nature. While proponents of the social model suggest that such perspectives downplay the real material disadvantages that disabled people experience (Barnes, 2012), Shildrick's critique encourages disability scholars to question the limitations of the social model in order to promote new ways of thinking about embodiment and the social and cultural constructions of disability.

Cultural Models of Disability

Cultural models of disability are based in the interdisciplinary field of cultural disability studies, which explores disability through both sociological and humanities-based perspectives, blending disability studies approaches with ideas from cultural studies about cultural production and representation (Bolt, 2012). Culture can be described as "the totality of 'things' created and employed by a particular people or a society" (Waldschmidt, 2017, p. 24), including institutions, objects, values, ideas, social attitudes and behaviors, and narratives. Cultural models of disability question the relationship between disability and cultural values, beliefs, and expectations, investigating "how practices of (de)normalization result in the social category we have come to call 'disability'" (Waldschmidt, 2017, p. 24). Expanding the social model's focus on the social and political oppression of disabled people, cultural models of disability also acknowledge the subjective, individualized bodily experience of disability in interaction with a person's environmental context, exploring disability as "a relationship between body and society" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 9).

The idea of the norm and normalcy as hegemonic constructs that permeate society and influence cultural production is central to a cultural understanding of disability (Davis, 2013). Emerging from the field of statistics in the 1800s, the concept of the norm as an average and the idea that a population could be normed created a distinctive social divide between presumed normal and deviant populations (Davis, 2013). The idea of a normal distribution of characteristics within a population was a key concept to the field of eugenics, which added the idea of ranking characteristics from most to least desirable (Davis, 2013). For example, both higher and lower than average intelligence would be

considered deviant characteristics in a normal distribution, but higher intelligence could be ranked as more desirable and thus a positive deviancy, versus low intelligence which was positioned by eugenicists as a negative and thus undesirable deviancy (Davis, 2013). Eugenicists associated the idea of the norm with human progress and thus sought to eliminate negative deviancies or undesirable traits from the population (Davis, 2013; Nielsen, 2012). Disability was one such characteristic that the eugenicists targeted as a negative deviancy, a legacy which continues today in the medical, social, and cultural positioning of disability as abnormal and as deficiency. In order for the normal/abnormal and abled/disabled binaries to continue to be produced and reproduced through social and cultural understandings of disability, the idea of normalcy "must constantly be enforced in public venues (like the novel), must always be creating and bolstering its image by processing, comparing, constructing, deconstructing images of normalcy and the abnormal" (Davis, 2013, p. 10). Such reinforcement of the idea of normalcy often happens through cultural representations.

Cultural models of disability build on this notion. For this dissertation, I use the model proposed by Waldschmidt (2017), whose approach to constructing a cultural model of disability "assumes that impairments and disabilities are structuring culture(s) and at the same time are structured and lived through culture" (p. 20). Waldschmidt suggests that within a specific cultural context, the creation of normative categories through systems, processes, practices, discourse, and other cultural artifacts leads to the construction of disability as a signifier of embodied deviance from cultural notions of "normal" health and ability. She outlines four ideas that guide her understanding of a cultural model. The first is that the concepts of impairment, disability, and normality are

all cultural constructs that depend on the historical-social context and the power structures of a culture at a particular moment in time. Thus these concepts cannot be taken as a given fact and cannot be causally associated with discrimination outside of a specific cultural context. This leads to the second feature of her cultural model, which is that the idea of disability is an "embodied category of differentiation," which "exists only when and insofar as certain (bodily and embodied) differences can be distinguished and thought of as 'relevant for health'" within a cultural context (Waldschmidt, 2017, p. 25). Disability as a concept is thus interpreted through cultural understandings of bodily difference. The third tenet of the model is that cultural understandings of disability and ability are interdependent, and that both "relate to prevailing symbolic orders and institutional practices of producing normality and deviance, the self and the other, familiarity and alterity" (Waldschmidt, 2017, p. 25). In this way culture produces our understandings of what it means to be disabled and nondisabled, and one concept cannot exist without the other. Finally, Waldschmidt contends that the cultural model decenters disability to examine society and culture more broadly, problematizing the way that cultures produce knowledge of the body, construct normalcy and deviancy, and create cultural practices based on these ideas. She suggests that cultural models are aligned with the idea of dis/ability, where the use of the slash problematizes the construction of the notions of ability and disability alike.

While there are many sites for the cultural production of disability, narratives are one such site that has been explored in depth and which has particular relevance for this dissertation, based on my use of a narrative inquiry methodology. Stories about disability are produced through many cultural mediums, including through literature, media,

cinema, oral histories, and social practices. Historically these narratives have typically provided limited representations that focus on disability as an individual obstacle to overcome or that use disability as a metaphorical device or to mark characters as different or exceptional (Mitchell & Snyder, 2013, 2015). While popular narratives of disability may portray different types of impairment in different ways, such as positioning physical disabilities as tragedy or using characters with intellectual disabilities to evoke compassion, these narratives typically function to "mak[e] the audience feel good about itself and its own *normality*" (emphasis in original, Davis, 2017, p. 39). Such narratives also create the cultural expectation that people with disabilities should account for their impairments in ways that relieve the discomfort of nondisabled people (Couser, 2013).

The cultural understandings and expectations that are communicated through traditional narrative representations of disability have also led to the creation of larger cultural metanarratives of disability over time. Bolt (2012) describes metanarrative as "a story under which those of us who have impairments often find ourselves, an overriding narrative that seems to displace agency" (p. 292). Bolt (2012) provides the example of the cultural trope of the blind beggar, and relates how his own experiences with visual impairment have been shaped by such metanarratives to the extent that he was once asked if he was collecting money for the blind while he was waiting for a friend outside of a restaurant. Such metanarratives are perpetuated by a lack of critical social and cultural engagement with tropes and stereotypes about impairment, and relate to "the normate assumption that impairment cancels out other qualities, reducing the complex person to a single attribute" (Bolt, 2012, p. 292).

These traditional cultural narratives and metanarratives of disability are clearly problematic, objectifying and denying agency to disabled people. Couser (2013) suggests that in contrast to other marginalized populations, "disabled people have been *hyper-represented* in mainstream culture," subjecting them to "objectifying notice in the form of mediated staring" (emphasis in original, p. 456). Such representations are often a result of the fact that disabled people are rarely involved in or control the production of these cultural representations (Couser, 2013; Davis, 2017). For this reason scholars in the field of disability studies suggest counternarratives of disability based on the lived experiences of disabled people as a resource for dismantling negative cultural representations and introducing new meanings and representations of disability (Couser, 2013; Mitchell & Snyder, 2015). In particular, life writing by disabled people has produced narratives of disability that counter negative representation, and which "can combat dehumanizing meanings and, therefore, become politically productive for those who inhabit marginalized embodiments" (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015, pp. 128–129). Others have suggested that narratives and counternarratives can be used effectively to explore and bring to light the experiences of disabled people as they intersect with other salient identities, such as race (Annamma et al., 2016; Stienstra, 2012). In pursuing narrative inquiry as an avenue to understanding lived experience, I must take into consideration these ideas about traditional and counternarratives of disability and think critically about how the narratives I produce relate to the cultural production of disability in educational spaces.

Disability Studies in Education

As an interdisciplinary field, disability studies scholars have examined the social and cultural role of disability in a broad range of disciplines, including education. As a subbranch of disability studies, the goal of Disability Studies in Education (DSE) is "to deepen understandings of the daily experiences of people with disabilities in schools and universities, throughout contemporary society, across diverse cultures, and within various historical contexts" (Connor et al., 2008, pp. 441-42). One of the unifying interests of DSE scholars is an expansion of research methodologies to explore experiences of disability in educational spaces, arising from a dissatisfaction with the restrictive, positivist nature of scholarship traditionally accepted in the field of special education (Connor et al., 2008). DSE scholars are also motivated by concerns over the discordance between the lived experiences of disabled people and the medicalized, deficit perspectives of disability upon which traditional special education practices and research are founded (Connor et al., 2008). However, DSE does not focus exclusively on special education research and practice, as "educational disablement often begins in general education settings" (Gabel, 2005, p. 17). Thus DSE looks across educational contexts to challenge ableism and deficit perspectives of difference more widely (Gabel, 2005).

Fundamentally DSE is based on the premise that disability is a social construct, rejecting the medical model's focus on individual deficits (Connor et al., 2008). Historically, medical conceptualizations of disability led to the use of schools as sites for disability intervention and the conflation of education with the idea of curing disability (Price, 2015). These understandings of disability later informed many of the premises upon which special education laws, programs, and practices were founded, including the practices of diagnosing disability through standardized measurements and physically

segregating disabled students in separate classroom spaces (Connor & Olander, 2020; Price, 2015). DSE scholars argue that medical perspectives privilege professional opinions and technical measures of progress while focusing on remediation, curricular modification, and compensatory skills training in instruction rather than taking a student-centered approach to teaching and learning (Connor & Olander, 2020; Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). In contrast, education techniques based on social models focus on contextual barriers to students' success, assume student competence, and assert that students belong in the inclusion classroom and have a right to be provided with the services that they need in order to succeed (Biklen, 2020; Connor & Olander, 2020). These opposing conceptualizations of disability have led to the long-standing debate over the practice of inclusion, which remains contested in the field of special education today (Connor & Olander, 2020; Kauffman & Hornby, 2020).

Given this context, "[t]he challenge for disability studies in education is that of identifying and removing barriers to educational access, participation and success" (Moore & Slee, 2012, p. 233) for disabled students. Such work entails critically assessing education reforms, including those that are labeled "inclusive," as well as educating teachers to understand and critique the many forms of exclusion that exist in educational spaces and the ableist assumptions behind common education practices (Moore & Slee, 2012). It also requires educators to challenge the underlying behaviorist and positivist traditions of special education that "pathologiz[e] difference in pursuit of normalization" (Ware, 2005, p. 105). Such work must be undertaken by both general educators and special educators as well as DSE scholars. Finally, DSE also emphasizes the experience, perspectives, and agendas of disabled people and prioritizes their leadership role in

developing the field and changing educational practices (Connor et al., 2008; Gabel, 2005; Moore & Slee, 2012).

DisCrit in Education: The Intersections of Disability and Race

Dis/ability Critical Race Studies, or DisCrit, is an approach to studying the intersection of dis/ability and race that provides important insights into how education systems and practices have been shaped by the social constructs of disability and race, as well as how "students are simultaneously raced and dis/abled" within these systems (Annamma et al., 2016, p. 13). The intersection of these identities produces "situations of disadvantage, marginalization and oppression that differ from the experiences of those who are disabled, or who are racial minorities [sic]" (Stienstra, 2012, p. 381). In the field of education, DisCrit examines the ways that dis/ability and racism are institutionalized in the education system, creating different educational experiences for students of color with disabilities than for their white peers with disabilities (Annamma et al., 2016). For example, the use of standardized testing in educational contexts has historically and culturally been used to devalue both students of color and disabled students through shaping a dominant ideology around what counts as intelligence, and has contributed to the overrepresentation of students of color in some special education categories (Mendoza et al., 2016).

Beyond the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education, differences in educational experiences are also illustrated by the increased likelihood that students of color with disabilities will be educated in segregated classrooms and subject to school discipline, and the decreased likelihood that students of

color with disabilities will have access to higher education (Annamma et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2008). Annamma et al. (2016) provide the example that:

> …labeling a White student with a learning disability may lead to more support in the general education classroom and extra time on high-stakes tests, which can ensure access to college, whereas for a student of color, the same disability label can result in increased segregation, less access to the general education curriculum, and therefore, limited access to post-secondary education. (p. 25)

In trying to better understand these differences, DisCrit questions how race contributes to where students are placed in relation to the metaphorical line that divides special education from general education (Annamma et al., 2016). DisCrit scholars have also examined how language as a cultural artifact has been used to frame the "achievement gap," in such a way as to blame marginalized students, both students of color and disabled students, for educational outcomes that are a product of the historical and social oppression of these groups (Mendoza et al., 2016; Thorius & Tan, 2016). These insights are crucial to an examination of how disabled students experience school, and how the social markers of dis/ability and race may make it difficult for students of color with disabilities to experience solidarity with either identity group (Annamma et al., 2016). DisCrit also asks educators to consider the multidimensionality of students' identities and to understand how whiteness and ability as forms of property in the education system lead to vastly different experiences for students based on their intersecting identities (Annamma et al., 2016). Thus, regardless of the racial identities of my student participants, DisCrit provides an important framework for reflecting on how privilege and identity shape students' experiences throughout the college choice process.

Implications for the Current Research

Disability Studies, and Disability Studies in Education in particular, provides an important lens through which to examine the educational experiences of disabled students in the American school system. As Baglieri and colleagues (2011) suggest, "the interpretations made about some people's differences hold direct and profound implications for how they are educated in our public schools" (p. 271). Approaching my research with an eye toward the ways that disability is socially and culturally constructed in schools has reminded me to interrogate my own and others' understandings of disability and assumptions about schools as I interpreted students' experiences. DSE also prompted me to reflect on the question "Who decides who is normal and who is not (and by implication, is abnormal) in schools?" (Connor, 2020, p. 24) as I listened to students' stories. Moreover, understanding how the construction of disability has evolved over time and shaped special education in the United States adds further context to the stories of how my student participants experienced special education and college choice. I will turn to this topic momentarily.

A Note about Theory and Method

Narrative inquiry as a methodology is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of individuals, from which the inquiry begins and in which it ends. As such, Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) warn against the dangers of viewing individuals' experiences through the lens of social theories, as doing so may lead to a tendency to treat participants' stories as merely "examples of an oppressive social structure" (p. 64) that shapes and dictates the way that participants' understand their own experiences. They suggest such a perspective "dismiss[es] the lived experience of persons as a possible source of insight" (p. 64), and

that in ascribing individuals' behaviors and experiences to larger social structures of oppression, the researcher inherently silences participant voices. On the other side of this theory-method divide, disability studies communities and disability activists have often downplayed individual experiences with disability in order to distance understandings of disability from individualized, medical perspectives that define disability as deficit (Gabel, 2005). However, this preference has shifted over time as disability studies scholars have come to more deeply consider the role of lived experience, embodiment, and disability identity in understanding disability as a social and cultural construct (Gabel, 2005).

I have kept both of these perspectives in mind during my research process. Based on the ontological commitment to experience on which narrative inquiry is founded, I have been mindful that "all representations of experience – including representations of macrosocial influences on that experience – ultimately arise from first-person lived experience and need to find their warrant in their influence on that experience" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 49-50). Keeping participants' experiences centered and remaining cognizant that "critique needs to be motivated by the problematic elements within that experience" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 50) has been key to remaining true to my methodological approach. At the same time, recognizing that the larger social and cultural narratives about disability in educational spaces shape the ways that students experience college choice has also been critical to understanding this process.

Disability and Special Education in the American School System

Schools and educational practices are shaped by the social, economic, and political environment of a particular historical moment (Valle & Connor, 2019), and

while public understandings of disability have shifted over time (Nielsen, 2012), there are several persisting themes in the history of disability in the United States that are especially relevant to special education. The American special education system has been shaped by socio-historical beliefs that tie disability to a lack of economic productivity, that use disability as a reason for denying rights to certain groups of people, and that associate disability with disease, deficiency, and social deviancy (Valle & Connor, 2019; Winzer, 2009). These beliefs led to the development of a special education system that historically excluded students with disabilities and which continues to uphold practices of separating many disabled students from their nondisabled peers (Connor & Ferri, 2007; Winzer, 2009). Understanding this history of exclusion is critical to understanding some of the central premises of the social constructivist view of disability at the heart of Disability Studies in Education – namely, that schools are responsible for creating barriers to the educational success of disabled students and that segregated special education placements are an obstacle to the full participation of disabled students in society (Baglieri et al., 2011; Connor & Olander, 2020; Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014).

Historical Context of Disability in America

Nielsen (2012) provides a thorough description of the ways that disability in the United States has been historically conceptualized in economic terms. Prior to the arrival of European colonists, most Indigenous cultures in North America did not have a term synonymous with disability, and the idea of disability was more of a relational or wellness issue describing people who had weak community ties. In contrast, the early colonists largely understood disability as an issue of economy, and physical impairments were only remarkable if they prevented a person from performing socially-expected tasks

and labor. Colonists were more concerned about cognitive and psychological impairments that might lead to individuals becoming wards of the community "because of their general inability to provide for their own financial support" (p. 22), which led to the institutionalization of many disabled people as a way to both contain them and to provide rudimentary custodial care. The economic implications of disability became more pronounced with industrialization in the mid-1800s, when jobs were increasingly moved from the home and community settings to cities and factories where disabled people were often unwelcome or unable to work. As a result of the widespread exclusion of disabled people from industry, disability coalitions in the early 1900s focused their activism on access to employment, and although the Rehabilitation Act of 1918 provided some employment benefits to disabled people, activists would continue to fight for access to economic opportunities throughout the twentieth century (Nielsen, 2012). While the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and later the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 expressly prohibited discrimination against disabled people in employment (Ashbakar, 2011), work opportunities for many disabled Americans continue to be limited today (NCES, 2017).

The idea of disability has also been used as a mechanism to deny rights to certain groups of people throughout the nation's history. From the founding of the United States, disability was a concept used to define citizenship and to exclude certain groups of people from voting, delineating "those who embodied ableness and thus full citizenship, as apart from those whose bodies and minds were considered deficient and defective" (Nielsen, 2012, p. 50). Along with people with disabilities, groups considered unfit for citizenship included women, Black people, Indigenous people, and later immigrants, all

of whom were considered mentally and physically inferior by the white patriarchy (Baynton, 2001; Nielsen, 2012). Proponents of slavery and eugenicists used similar logic as a justification for dehumanizing and denying rights to enslaved African people and their Black descendants, arguing that Black people lacked the intellectual capacity to be fit for full participation in society and even going so far as to suggest that freedom disabled Black people (Baynton, 2001; Nielsen, 2012). Disability was also used as an immigration screening mechanism, allowing immigration officers to deport people who showed signs of physical or cognitive disabilities under the premises that they would be unable to work or care for themselves and would thus become a burden on the state (Baynton, 2001; Nielsen, 2012).

Disability has also long been associated with the ideas of disease, deficiency, and social deviancy. The medicalization of disability in America can be traced back to the time of the American Revolution, when people started turning to physicians for disability-related treatments and attempts to cure disability (Nielsen, 2012). Physicians began prescribing medical treatments for people with cognitive or psychological impairments both in institutions and in private homes, which often including horrific measures such as confinement, bleeding, physical abuse, and other forms of deprivation (Nielsen, 2012). As the field of medicine became more professionalized over time, beliefs about disability became more informed by biological concepts rather than religious or supernatural ones (Byrom, 2001; Nielsen, 2012). As a result of this increasing medicalization, institutions for people with cognitive or sensory disabilities often became sites where the idea of education was conflated with medical intervention and cure (Price, 2015). Similarly, hospital schools founded at the end of the nineteenth

century for people with physical disabilities became increasingly reliant on medical professionals, and the dual focus of providing education and medical treatment at these facilities shifted toward a primary focus on medical intervention by the 1920s (Byrom, 2001). The role of psychologists in treating disabilities also became more commonplace in the early 1900s, and concerns about links between mental illness and moral depravity led to more a prominent role for psychologists in the early detection and treatment of childhood mental illness (Winzer, 2009). Additionally, as medical advances improved over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, people were more likely to survive from potentially disabling diseases, such as polio, which contributed to an increase in the prevalence of disability and strengthened the association between disability, disease, and medicine (Nielsen, 2012).

In conjunction with the medicalization of disability, American society has typically treated disability as undesirable and indicative of personal deficiency, leading to social stigma against disabled people. While this was true from the beginning of the colonial period, when people with disabilities were mostly prevented from emigrating to the colonies because of their perceived deficiencies (Nielsen, 2012), disability stigma increased significantly in the middle of the nineteenth century due to the spread of eugenic beliefs that disability was a hereditary defect that caused degeneracy and moral depravity (Davis, 2013; Spaulding & Pratt, 2015; Winzer, 2009). The increased social adherence to these beliefs coincided with the growth in institutionalization of disabled people over the course of the nineteenth century and led to the state-sanctioned sterilization of thousands of people with disabilities in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Nielsen, 2012; Winzer, 2009). The rise of intelligence testing in the early 1900s further

buoyed social beliefs of disability as inferiority, suggesting that intelligence was a fixed, inherited trait and leading "to individuals with lower IQs being viewed as 'feeble-minded,' 'mentally defective,' 'ineducable,' and the cause of social problems" (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2011, p. 6). Such beliefs remained prevalent in social opinion until at least the second half of the twentieth century, when disability rights activists worked to reposition disability as a civil rights issue rather than a medical one (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).

Changes in public sentiment regarding disability informed the evolving approach to educating disabled students in the United States. Many early efforts at education for disabled students revolved around vocational training in order to make disabled people more economically productive (Byrom, 2001; Nielsen, 2012; Winzer, 2009). Despite the importance of education for economic advancement, disabled students historically have been denied access to academic educational opportunities under the premise that they were unfit for the general education classroom or that they were ineducable due to cognitive or behavioral differences (Winzer, 2009). Additionally, the medicalization of disability and stigma against disabled people have shaped the ways that students are identified and evaluated for special education, and ultimately how they are served by schools (Connor & Olander, 2020). Medical perspectives have led to a deficit-approach to educating students with disabilities in which educators focus on identifying skills or abilities that students are lacking and then provide instruction to allow students "to function *normally* in a *normal* environment – at least as far as possible" (emphasis in original; Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014, p. 18).

Evolution of Special Education

The historical context of education for students with disabilities in the United States is largely a story of exclusion, separation, and neglect. Beginning with the founding of institutions for students with sensory or cognitive disabilities in the 1800s, early attempts at education for individuals with disabilities were typically vocationally-oriented, required the physical separation of disabled students, and were founded on beliefs that equated disability with dependency (Winzer, 2009). Institutions were often endorsed as a vehicle for spiritual redemption for disabled students or a way to keep them out of trouble while providing basic care, thus serving the dual purpose of purporting to protect children with disabilities from society while also segregating them in order to minimize their impact on communities (Winzer, 2009). The conditions in many of these institutions were deplorable, with disabled people suffering physical and emotional abuse and being subjected to humiliating and violent treatment (Nielsen, 2012; Price, 2015; Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). At the same time, some institutions became important sources of community for students; this was especially true at institutions for Deaf students, which are often credited as an important source of Deaf culture (Winzer, 2009). Though institutions for Deaf students and visually-impaired students became increasingly focused on academics as the nineteenth century progressed, institutions for students with cognitive disabilities remained primarily custodial in function, since many of these students were considered ineducable (Winzer, 2009). Across the board, students often had to work for their keep and many institutions had strict disciplinary practices meant to tightly control students' activities and behavior, as evidenced by reformatory schools for children with emotional or behavioral issues (Winzer, 2009). In the late 1800s the emergence of the rehabilitation movement also led to the founding of hospital schools,

where education and medical treatment were provided to students as part of the effort to end the economic dependency of people with physical disabilities (Byrom, 2001).

The practice of separating students with disabilities from their peers was also established early on in the common schools movement. As states began to make education more broadly accessible and eventually compulsory through common schools, a dual classroom system emerged (Winzer, 2009). Students who were considered to be disruptive to the general classroom environment, including students with disabilities and immigrants, were placed in "special" or ungraded classes where little instruction was provided (Winzer, 2009). The philosophy informing this approach was that leaving such students in the general education classroom would negatively impact the learning of "normal" students and would overtax teachers, who were often already stretched thin in many places due to the large number of students in each class (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015; Winzer, 2009). Compulsory education laws and the increasing diversity of the school-age population as a result of immigration fueled the growth of these special, segregated classes within the public education system in the first half of the twentieth century (Winzer, 2009). Although some states passed compulsory education laws specifically for students with disabilities and began to dedicate state funding to special education programs, many students with disabilities were still excluded from public education entirely (Winzer, 2009). The ruling in the Wisconsin court case *Beattie v. State Board of Education* in 1919 exemplifies this continued exclusion, concluding that students with physical disabilities "could be excluded from school if their presence was deemed depressing and nauseating to other students" (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2011, p. 8).

Several other social developments at the opening of the twentieth century shaped the way that ability and disability were positioned in the education system. As immigration increased public schools became both an important venue for assimilating immigrant children into American culture as well as a mechanism for sorting students into appropriate occupational paths based on their social status and ability (Valle & Connor, 2019). Intelligence testing became widely used at the beginning of the twentieth century among educators as a tool to diagnose disability and sort students into different curricular tracks, including separating students with the lowest scores into special education (Valle & Connor, 2019; Winzer, 2009). Students who were found intellectually inferior according to IQ tests joined immigrant students and students who displayed deviant or difficult behavior in physically segregated special education classes, which were often "located in obscure places in schools - in basements, down dark hallways, in former closets, or in the back of the school building" (Winzer, 2009, p. 84). The field of psychology also began to more heavily influence the education of disabled students, with psychologists making distinctions between different types of psychological, cognitive, and behavioral differences, leading to the establishment of new disability categories and treatments for children with emotional or behavioral deviations in psychology clinics (Winzer, 2009). Autism and schizophrenia were distinguished as separate disorders and were typically treated by placing children in residential psychiatric institutions that "sanctified therapy, clinicalized behavior, and centered problems exclusively within the child" (Winzer, 2009, p. 149). As more children went to school, differentiation between special education and the general education classroom increased, and special education classes became widely accepted as a necessary and well-established part of the public

education system by the early 1950s (Winzer, 2009). In the late 1950s, academic tracking also solidified as a well-established practice as a result of a cold-war era focus on increasing the nation's competitive edge, with an emphasis on providing the best instruction to students in college-bound tracks (Valle & Connor, 2019).

The 1960s brought about some changes in public sentiment about people with disabilities as well as concerted advocacy efforts by disabled people to remove social obstacles to their full participation in society (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). As the idea of social integration became increasingly popular, segregated education spaces came under attack. The idea of normalization, or "the belief that all individuals who are exceptional, no matter what the level and type of disability, should be provided with a living environment and education as close to normal as possible" (Winzer, 2009, p. 107), translated into a larger movement to deinstitutionalize services for people with disabilities, especially those with cognitive disabilities. A number of efficacy studies in the 1950s and 60s, although methodologically questionable, further suggested that segregated classes did not academically benefit students with disabilities (Winzer, 2009). Educators in the field, such as Lloyd Dunn, also suggested that special classes stigmatized students with disabilities and lowered teachers' expectations of them (Winzer, 2009).

During this time period, parent groups also advocated for increased funding for special education services, lobbied for special education legislation at the state and federal level, and pursued litigation in the court system for increased educational opportunities for their children with disabilities (Winzer, 2009). Two high-profile court cases, both decided in 1972, stand out in their contributions toward the right to public

education for disabled children. In *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, the court determined that the schools in the state of Pennsylvania could not exclude children with intellectual disabilities from public schools, which they had previously done based on the argument that such students were ineducable (Ashbakar, 2011). Likewise, in *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia*, the district court ruled that a lack of funding was not a valid excuse for denying education to students with disabilities, and that all students were entitled to a free public education (Ashbakar, 2011). These cases, among others, helped pave the way for the major federal legislation that guaranteed education to disabled students a few years later.

The passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142) in 1975 was a landmark moment in the history of special education (Ashbakar, 2011). The law required states to provide a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and provided federal funding to supplement state and local special education programs (Ashbakar, 2011). However, while the law imposed conditions on state and local school systems and required Individual Education Programs (IEPs) for each student with a disability, the law was procedural in nature and did not guarantee rights to specific disability services for students (Winzer, 2009). Moreover, the premise of the least restrictive environment was not a promise of inclusion in the general education curriculum, as separate classes were still considered to be necessary for some students with disabilities (Valle & Connor, 2019; Winzer, 2009). The law also faced challenges with implementation after its creation; limited accountability for schools, inconsistent student eligibility determination

processes, and a lack of support and training for educators made it difficult to evaluate the impact or effectiveness of the law (Winzer, 2009). As Winzer (2009) suggests, "simply because children were in general classes and file cabinets were stuffed with IEPs did not mean that they were being taught more effectively" (p. 121). The passage of Public Law 94-142 also led to increases in litigation against school systems by the families of disabled students, dealing with topics such as the poor conditions of institutions for the disabled, due process rights, the inappropriate use of educational testing for special education placement decisions, and the level of educational services and benefits that disabled students were entitled to receive (Winzer, 2009). Such litigation helped shape subsequent amendments and reauthorizations of Public Law 94-142, which was rebranded the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 and reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act in 2004 (Winzer, 2009).

In the 1980s, the entire American education system entered a period of reform aimed at better preparing students to be globally competitive workers and better serving marginalized students in the school system (Winzer, 2009). In light of these larger reform goals, concerns about the processes and functions of special education came to the forefront and the idea of inclusion evolved to "describe educational systems where equity was in place for all students" (Winzer, 2009, p. 202). The majority of special education students had not been mainstreamed into the general education classroom by the beginning of the decade, and critics of segregated special education placements worried about the exclusion of disabled children from the general education curriculum as well as the stigma attached to special education labels (Winzer, 2009). Some critics of special

education also expressed concerns about the percentage of school funding being dedicated to special education students, the reliance on specialists to provide services to special education students, and the overall efficacy of special education programs (Winzer, 2009). On the other side, critics of mainstreaming and inclusion raised concerns about whether students with disabilities were receiving appropriately individualized programs in the general education classroom (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2011).

The move towards inclusion was advanced with the advent of the "Regular Education Initiative" (REI) led by Madeline Will, the Assistant Secretary for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services during the Reagan administration (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2011; Winzer, 2009). The REI asserted that special education programs were inefficient and that all students should be taught in the general education classroom, while also reducing pull-out and resource room services (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2011). Under REI, the federal government worked to lower federal spending on education, including special education, and promoted inclusion as a way to meet spending goals (Winzer, 2009). As inclusion became more prevalent, two sides emerged to the inclusion movement: those who supported full inclusion with all students receiving their education in the general education classroom, and those who "supported a continuum of services within the least restrictive environment" (Winzer, 2009, p. 208), including the use of separate classroom spaces when it was deemed necessary. Support for full inclusion was bolstered by the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990, which did not mandate inclusion as a practice but was interpreted to strongly encourage general education placements with supplemental services rather than separate classroom settings (Winzer, 2009).

The tide of support for inclusion has ebbed and flowed over the decades. By the end of the 1990s, many critics were challenging the appropriateness of the full inclusion model, and some parents began to question whether inclusion models allowed their children to receive the highest quality services possible (Winzer, 2009). Litigation concerning special education practices increased in the 1980s and 1990s as a result, and the debate over inclusion continues today (Winzer, 2009). Proponents of traditional special education practices argue that the move to full inclusion lacks research evidence, that sorting and labelling students is a necessary process, and that full inclusion of all students with disabilities is neither possible nor appropriate (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). Conversely, proponents of full inclusion believe that all students belong in the general education classroom, with appropriate support, and that student struggles in the general education classroom are a result of failures in the school system rather than inherent deficits in individual students (Connor & Olander, 2020). Some DSE scholars even suggest that the term inclusion has been appropriated by the field of special education to perform a more liberal rhetoric while essentially failing to institute practices that actually promote inclusion for disabled students (Moore & Slee, 2012; Ware, 2005). Others suggest that inclusion practices such as co-teaching and modifying the curriculum are also problematic, attempting to retrofit traditional instruction rather than developing new instructional practices with diverse students in mind (Baglieri et al., 2011). As of the fall of 2021, 67 percent of students with disabilities served under IDEA spent at least 80 percent of their school day in general education classes, and 13 percent of disabled students spent less than 40 percent of their school day in general education (NCES, 2023). Thus the debate over inclusion remains relevant to the educational experiences of

disabled students and to the decisions about where they receive their education in contemporary schools.

The passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 further complicated education for students with disabilities. NCLB required all students, including students served under IDEA, to meet annual benchmarks for academic progress as measured by state-administered standardized tests; students' failure to meet these benchmarks would lead to corrective action for their school, which could include reducing funding for failing schools or school closure (Shindel, 2003). Although states were in charge of the implementation of NCLB, including the development of alternative assessments for students with severe cognitive impairment, states were required to submit their accountability plans to the federal government for approval (Shindel, 2003). Critics of NCLB have argued that the focus on high-stakes testing causes teachers and administrators to be wary of students who might not pass state tests and who would thus negatively impact a school's status and rankings (Moore & Slee, 2012). Therefore, while the intent of NCLB may have been to increase school accountability, in practice the law may have increased stigma against students with disabilities in schools and led to their further marginalization. While the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 adapted some of the accountability measures of NCLB, ESSA's continued prescription of high-stakes testing perpetuates a ranking system that values some students more than others (Valle & Connor, 2019).

Postsecondary Education for Disabled Students

Much like other educational spaces in the United States, American colleges and universities as originally conceptualized were not intended for disabled students. The

earliest American colleges were places where young, White men from elite backgrounds received ministerial and professional training, and access to postsecondary education for the rest of the population was virtually non-existent until the middle of the nineteenth century (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Yet even as college enrollment expanded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, few students with disabilities had access to postsecondary education, with the notable exception of the establishment of Gallaudet College for Deaf students in 1864 (Madaus, 2011). Not only were disabled students thought to be unfit for postsecondary education, but institutions of higher education were often located near institutions for disabled people and were responsible for funding and producing research on disability, positioning disabled people as objects of academic study rather than as students (Dolmage, 2017).

Access to postsecondary education for people with disabilities began to expand somewhat with the passage of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1918, which created some postsecondary opportunities for veterans, many of whom had physical, sensory, or psychological disabilities as a result of their service (Madaus, 2011). The GI Bill in 1944 further expanded access to postsecondary education for veterans, who remained the primary focus of policy discussions around disability and postsecondary education until the 1960s, much of which focused on physical impairment and the accessibility of campuses (Madaus, 2011). Despite these early steps towards access, discrimination against students with disabilities in admission to college wasn't prohibited until the regulations of Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act were enacted in 1977 (Madaus, 2011). The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 further supported college access for students with disabilities, but a number of court cases

in the decade following its passage led to increasingly restrictive definitions of disability and what qualified as appropriate accommodations (Madaus, 2011). While the reauthorization of the ADA in 2008 included language to counter some of the restrictions created by the courts (Keenan et al., 2019), students with disabilities continue to face challenges in gaining equitable access to postsecondary education and the accommodations to which they are entitled. As Dolmage (2017) describes it, the steep steps that mark the arrival to some of the oldest universities in the United States serve as both a metaphor for the inaccessibility of postsecondary education for disabled people as well as a literal physical barrier to the participation of some people with disabilities.

Transition Planning

Given the many challenges that students with disabilities may face on the path to postsecondary education, which will be discussed in depth later, actively planning for the transition to college while students are still in high school is a critical element of postsecondary preparation for disabled students. When the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was reauthorized as IDEA in 1990, the reauthorization added a requirement to the law that schools must create a postsecondary transition plan as part of the IEP planning process for all transition-aged youth who received special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Transition plans should be based on a student's strengths and interests and include postsecondary goals for education, employment, and independent living as well as the services that will be provided to help students meet their goals (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004; Mittnacht, 2012). IDEA defines transition services as activities that "facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities," and may include instruction and related school

services (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). While the federal law requires transition services to begin by the time a student turns sixteen, many states (including Massachusetts, where this study was conducted) require transition planning activities to begin by age fourteen (Mittnacht, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2020). Transition planning is meant to be a collaborative process between families, educators, and community service providers, but research suggests that students and their families are not always actively involved (Cameto, 2005; Lipscomb et al., 2018).

As part of the transition planning process, students and their IEP teams should consider what type of credential the student will need in order to succeed in their postsecondary goals (Webb, 2000). Recent data shows that 75 percent of students with disabilities who exited school in the 2020-21 academic year graduated with a regular diploma, whereas 10 percent received an alternative certificate, and 14 percent dropped out of school without a completion credential (NCES, 2023). Requirements for graduating with a standard diploma have increased over time, with more states offering alternative graduation credentials to disabled and nondisabled students who do not meet these requirements (Johnson et al., 2012). Students will need to know what is required of them in order to receive a regular high school diploma, what alternative diploma options are available to them, and whether different options will provide them with access to postsecondary education (Johnson et al., 2012). For disabled students who plan to attend college, they should begin transition planning early in order to ensure that they are also enrolled in the type of coursework that will allow them to gain admission to the type of

postsecondary institution to which they aspire (Madaus & Shaw, 2004; Shaw et al., 2009).

Research suggests that students with different disabilities may have differing experiences with transition planning and taking the steps needed to access college. Data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study – 2012 suggests that Autistic students, students with deaf-blindness, intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, and orthopedic impairments may be less prepared than other students with IEPs for the transition to life after high school, including lacking preparation for postsecondary education (Lipscomb et al., 2018). For example, a lower percentage of students labeled with each of these disability categories have taken a college entrance exam than have students with IEPs in general (Lipscomb et al., 2018). Other data shows that a smaller percentage of Autistic students and students with intellectual disabilities have attending a two-year or four-year college as their primary postsecondary goal in transition planning (9.8% and 22.9%, respectively) as compared to the percentage of students with other disabilities who have two-year or four-year college as a primary goal (52.4%; Shogren & Plotner, 2012). Students with intellectual disabilities and Autistic students are also less likely to participate actively in the transition planning process than students with other disabilities (Shogren & Plotner, 2012). Additionally, rates of earning a high school diploma as opposed to an alternative credential also vary by disability category, with students with speech or language impairments having the highest rate of regular diploma completion (87%) and students with multiple disabilities having the lowest rate of diploma completion (44%; NCES, 2023).

Implications of Legal Contexts: IDEA, ADA, and Section 504

While the history of special education provides context for the secondary school environment in which students experience the college choice process, it is also important to understand the laws governing educational services at both the secondary and postsecondary level and how the differences between these laws may impact students' transition to college. At the elementary and secondary school level, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees the right to a public education for disabled students, with subsequent reauthorizations of the law expanding the guidance around what FAPE and LRE entail as well as how services should be provided (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). At the postsecondary level, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as amended in 2008 (the American with Disabilities Act Amendments Act, or ADAAA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 guide the provision of educational services for disabled college students.

IDEA is an entitlement law that guarantees and provides funding for free educational services in the PreK-12 public education system to students ages 3-21, while ADA and Section 504 are civil rights legislation that prohibit disability-based discrimination at all levels of education but do not include any funding provisions (Madaus & Shaw, 2006; Shaw et al., 2010). While there are many differences between IDEA and ADA, the difference in the type of legislation (entitlement versus civil rights) between the two is key to understanding how educational access for students with disabilities differs at the K-12 and postsecondary education levels. As entitlement legislation, IDEA is meant to guarantee free educational services to students with disabilities at the K-12 level to enable disabled students to make measurable academic progress in the public school environment. Schools and districts are responsible for

identifying, evaluating, and providing appropriate services to students with disabilities

under IDEA, and the legislation is tied to the provision of funding for PreK-12 special

education services (Ashbakar, 2011). As of the 1990 reauthorization of IDEA, educators

are also required to establish individual transition plans (ITPs) within students' IEPs that

establish postsecondary goals for students with disabilities (U.S. Department of

Education, 2022). In contrast, ADA and Section 504 are meant to support students'

access to educational services at the postsecondary level, provided students can meet

admissions requirements and provide the appropriate disability documentation to justify

educational accommodations (Keenan et al., 2019; Madaus & Shaw, 2004). The onus for

requesting disability services, obtaining any required evaluation or documentation, and

following up to ensure services are provided is placed on the student under ADA at the

postsecondary level. As civil rights legislation, there is no funding provided to states or

education institutions in relation to ADA. Similarly, Section 504 prohibits disability-

based discrimination in any program or activity that receives federal funding, including

public schools and colleges or universities, but does not include any funding provisions.

 IDEA and ADA also provide different definitions of what qualifies as a disability

under the provisions of the law. IDEA defines disability by establishing 13 categories of

impairment that may necessitate the provision of special education services: intellectual

disability, hearing impairment, speech or language impairment, visual impairment,

emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairment, Autism, traumatic brain injury, other

health impairment, specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, multiple disabilities, or

developmental delay among children ages three through nine (U.S. Department of

Education, 2018). Students are determined to have a disability under IDEA if a group of

qualified professionals together with the student's parent decide that the student has a disability based on at least two methods of assessment, which must be provided in the child's primary language (Ashbakar, 2011). This definition essentially gives schools the license to determine which students are disabled for educational purposes. Under ADA, as amended, a disability is defined as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities," with major life activities broadly defined as including bodily functions and activities such as caring for oneself, learning, thinking, and communicating (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, As Amended, 2008). In the postsecondary environment, this means that individuals must seek out and provide disability documentation that focuses on "the need for specific accommodations based on functional limitations" (Keenan et al., 2019, p. 58). In this way students are still reliant on external sources of evaluation for identifying disability through deficit-based frameworks. However, students have more control over the visibility of disability in postsecondary education environments as they can make the decision not to seek out disability evaluation or not to disclose an identified disability.

Past to Present: Contemporary Experiences of Disability and Special Education

As social and cultural beliefs about disability evolved, so too did the practices that teachers and others used in educational spaces to work with students with disabilities. From merely providing a minimal level of custodial care to promoting full inclusion of disabled students, cultural understandings of disability and beliefs about the limitations and abilities of disabled people translated directly to the types of educational services that disabled students received and the location in which they received them. Much of the history of special education is a story of identifying difference and segregating students

who did not meet the expectations of socially-accepted educational norms. Additionally, social and cultural trends often led to changes in special education policy and practice that were not necessarily improvements over the practices that they replaced (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Understanding this history is critical to understanding how disabled students experience school today. The legacy of exclusion from the general education classroom, the practice of labeling and pathologizing difference, and the long history of stigmatizing disability in social spaces all inform the system of special education that currently exists, which in turn influences students' school experiences and college-going behaviors, including whether they believe that college is possible for them.

Within the context of this dissertation, it is important to note that my focus on the college choice processes of public school students who aspire to two- or four-year colleges limits the population of students with disabilities who were eligible to participate. Students with these college expectations might include students who historically would have been among the group of students labeled as "mentally retarded," such as Autistic students or students with learning disabilities (Winzer, 2009), or students with physical, sensory, or other health impairments. This group of students is also likely to include individuals who have been classified as having mild learning or emotional disabilities – groups of students who historically would likely have received some education in the public schools when others were excluded (Valle & Connor, 2019). Students classified as severely intellectually disabled or emotionally disturbed, who would have historically been excluded from public schools (Winzer, 2009), have also been excluded from this study because they are more likely to be non-diploma track, to learn outside of the general education classroom, or to leave high school before

completion (NCES, 2023), and are thus unlikely to have two- or four-year college aspirations by the time they reach their final year of high school. While the purpose of my research necessitates setting some criteria for participation, I also acknowledge that in setting these criteria I have excluded a substantial group of students who have long been neglected in education spaces. More research needs to be done to understand the educational experiences of these students and how they develop aspirations for their future, including whether they have college aspirations at some point in their educational trajectory and how those aspirations may be changed through their experiences of schooling.

I will now turn to an examination of the college choice process and how students with disabilities may experience this process in light of the social, cultural, and historical context of the meaning of disability in education spaces.

College Choice

While not the only pathway to middle-income employment in the United States, a college education is becoming an increasingly important gateway to economic opportunity in this country (Carnevale et al., 2016, 2018). The long-term shift over the last 50 years from a manufacturing economy to a knowledge-based and skilled-services economy has increased the demand for workers with a bachelor's degree or higher and decreased the demand for workers with only a high school diploma (Carnevale et al., 2018). This shift was exacerbated by the Great Recession of 2008 and more recently by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which workers with a high school diploma or less experienced the greatest number of initial job losses due to the pandemic lockdown (Carnevale, 2021; Carnevale et al., 2016). Workers with at least a bachelor's degree also

generally earn more than those with only a high school diploma, have lower rates of unemployment, and have higher rates of civic participation (Ma & Pender, 2023).

Research has shown that postsecondary education is also an important vehicle to economic opportunity for disabled Americans. In general, people with disabilities have lower rates of participation in the workforce than nondisabled people, and among those who do participate in the workforce, people with disabilities have lower rates of employment (NCES, 2017). However, participation in postsecondary education decreases the employment gap between disabled and nondisabled Americans in the workforce (NCES, 2017). People with disabilities who complete some postsecondary education are more likely to be employed and earn higher wages than disabled people who do not earn a postsecondary degree or certificate (Newman et al., 2011). Several studies have found this relationship to exist within subpopulations of people with disabilities, including among Autistic young adults (Whittenburg et al., 2019) and among young adults with learning disabilities (Madaus, 2006), but it's important to recognize that data on the general population of Americans with disabilities may hide differences in postsecondary attainment and employment outcomes between subpopulations with different types of impairment (Cheatham & Randolph, 2022). For example, one study found that individuals with physical disabilities were more likely than individuals with cognitive disabilities to report participating in postsecondary education or the workforce after high school (Cheatham & Randolph, 2022). Beyond the employment benefits, completing some postsecondary education has also been associated with higher rates of independent living and community participation as well as lower rates of involvement in the criminal justice system among young adults with disabilities (Newman et al., 2011).

The access to economic opportunities that postsecondary education can provide are especially important for disabled people in light of their historical exclusion from many forms of employment (Nielsen, 2012) and the continued discrimination that disabled people face in the workforce today (Bonaccio et al., 2020). Yet students with disabilities enroll in college at lower rates than their nondisabled peers and are more likely to attend two-year colleges or less selective institutions when they do enroll (Hinz et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2011). These disparities in college access suggest that the college decision-making process of disabled students may be significantly different from nondisabled students, which raises questions about equity in postsecondary and employment outcomes for these students after high school. This decision-making process, often referred to as the college choice process, is the focus of this dissertation.

College choice describes the process by which individuals first decide whether to participate in postsecondary education and then choose a postsecondary institution to attend. More specifically, Hossler et al. (1989) define college choice as "a complex, multistage process during which an individual develops aspirations to continue formal education beyond high school, followed later by a decision to attend a specific college, university or institution of advanced vocational training" (p. 234). While much of the college choice process today takes place formally during a student's high school years, students may begin forming postsecondary aspirations before high school and some students may not choose to attend a specific postsecondary institution until many years after high school graduation. For the purposes of this research, I focus on the college choice process beginning with the development of college aspirations before or during a student's high school years and progressing over the course of a student's high school

education through high school graduation. In this section I describe several relevant models of college choice as well as some of the factors that may be of particular importance to the college choice process of disabled students. I conclude by proposing a blended conceptual model of college choice that focuses specifically on the way that students with disabilities navigate their college processes within multiple layers of personal and environmental context, accounting for the influence of social and cultural understandings of disability on their college decision-making.

Models of College Choice

While many models and theories of college choice have emerged over the past fifty years or so, several models are of particular significance to this study. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model of choice and Webb's (2000) expansion of that model with a specific focus on students with disabilities describe the phases of decision-making through which students move as they consider attending postsecondary education and narrow their focus in on particular institutions. Perna's (2006) model of contextualized college choice provides additional insights on how students' college decisions are influenced by multiple, nested layers of social and environmental context. Taken together, these models provide a conceptual framework for thinking about the ways that disabled students' contexts influence them as they move through various stages of college decision-making during high school.

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Stage Model

Elaborating on previous models, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) propose a model of college choice that includes three stages: (1) predisposition; (2) search; and (3) choice. They suggest that students' decisions in each of these phases are shaped by the

interaction of individual and institutional factors (at the high school or postsecondary level), including institutional policies. Although Hossler and Gallagher only consider a limited number of these factors in their model, this acknowledgement of the importance of personal and educational context paves the way for future models that consider the role of context more deeply.

In the predisposition phase, students make the initial decision of whether or not to attend a postsecondary institution. A student's personal characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, prior academic achievement, and attitudes toward education are important in this phase, as are the levels of encouragement that students receive from parents and peers. Certain characteristics of a student's high school are also important to predisposition, such as the quality of the academic curriculum and the range of activities that a school offers, which can promote students' involvement at the high school level. Hossler and Gallagher also suggest that living in proximity to a college can impact predisposition, although postsecondary institutions otherwise have little impact on this stage. Predisposition for some students begins long before high school while others only begin considering postsecondary options once they enter high school. During predisposition, students who decide not to attend a postsecondary institution opt out of the remainder of the college choice process and begin to consider other postsecondary plans.

In the search stage, students gather information about colleges and form a "choice set," or "a group of institutions that a student has decided to apply to and seek more information about in order to make a better final matriculation decision" (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 214). A student's personal characteristics, such as income and prior

academic achievement, continue to be influential in the search stage, impacting the type and range of institutions that students consider as well as the level of support that students are likely to seek from high school counselors. Postsecondary institutions have a greater level of influence on this stage as students begin to have more interactions with postsecondary agents and exposure to institutional information, including through college-initiated outreach to students. Financial aid and college cost information are also important in the search phase as students try to navigate the process of applying for aid and determining the potential costs of particular institutions based on their understanding of net price (actual cost to students) versus list price (advertised tuition). Hossler and Gallagher suggest that each student will approach the search phase in their own unique way, as there is no one set procedure for forming a choice set.

In the final stage, choice, students narrow their choice set and decide which institution to attend. Students' family income levels once again play a role in this stage, especially in relation to whether or not financial aid is important to their decision. Student preferences and perceptions of the quality of institutions also influence their postsecondary choice, as do college outreach and yield activities. Hossler and Gallagher's model serves as the basis for many future iterations of college choice models, including for Webb (2000) who builds on this model to create a guide to college choice specifically designed for students with disabilities.

Webb's (2000) OPEN Model

Webb's (2000) Opportunities in Postsecondary Education through Networking (OPEN) model for students with disabilities expands Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model into five stages: (1) deciding; (2) exploring; (3) selecting; (4) applying; and (5)

enrolling. Concurrent with each of the five stages is a continuous process of preparation and planning, in which students, parents, and educators work together to ensure that students have the academic, career, and social skills necessary to be successful in college. Webb's model stresses the importance of a student's support team (which includes parents, teachers, and other members of a student's IEP team) as a key resource for students with disabilities throughout the college choice process, but highlights that students should be allowed to drive the process and to make their own decisions at each stage. Webb also advises that the earlier these processes begin for students with disabilities, the better, as many students with disabilities may need additional time to navigate the stages.

In the first stage, deciding, students identify a target career and determine what type of postsecondary education, if any, is necessary for their desired career path. Webb suggests that students begin by exploring their hobbies and identifying possible jobs that relate to their interests. This process can be supported by school counselors, teachers, and parents with resources that are often available at the school level to all students, such as career interest inventories, strengths assessments, or opportunities to shadow professionals in the field. Members of the student's support team can also help students to identify multiple and alternative career paths based on their interests in order to broaden the options available to them, but should do so without discouraging students from a particular career field. After identifying multiple career options, students then identify whether each option requires additional education or training beyond high school and what type of postsecondary program is appropriate for each option, again with the support of school personnel or parents. It is especially important for disabled students to

consider the type of secondary school diploma they will need for each postsecondary option and to discuss ways to ensure they will be prepared for admission to the appropriate type of postsecondary institutions. Webb points out that many states offer different types of diplomas or graduation credentials to students who receive special education services, and that not all of the available options will provide students with the academic credential they will need for admission to some postsecondary schools. This makes it even more critical for disabled students to start the college choice process early so that they can ensure they are taking a curriculum that matches their postsecondary goals. Webb also notes that some students will exit the college choice process at this point after finding that none of their desired career options require postsecondary education.

Though not designated as a separate stage, Webb's model proposes that the decision to pursue postsecondary education in this first phase also initiates a concurrent process of planning and preparing for college, which continues throughout the other stages of the OPEN model. This includes mapping out an academic program for a student's high school years and helping students to build self-awareness of their strengths, learning needs, and skills that support their academic and social success. Additionally, students can work with their support team to devise ways to practice self-determination and self-advocacy skills in preparation for the transition to college. Webb also includes preparing for and taking college admissions tests, as needed, in this preparation process, which may require extra work for disabled students if they decide to apply for testing accommodations.

Students who decide that postsecondary education is appropriate for their career plans next move into the exploring stage in which they collect information and consider what postsecondary options are available to them. Ideally, students will already have an idea of their strengths and needs when entering this stage after some initial preparation and planning. Webb recommends that students collect information about colleges' campus climates and extracurricular offerings, campus setting, admission requirements, academic programs and classes, disability and counseling services, residential options, costs, and availability of financial aid. Parents and support personnel can help students to collect and organize this information into a college portfolio for easy comparison when they select institutions to which to apply in the next stage. Once again, parents and educators can play an important role in this stage by encouraging students to explore multiple options and helping them to access multiple sources of information.

From exploring students move into selecting institutions that match their interests and needs, taking into account factors such as location, cost, and admission requirements – essentially creating the choice set described by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). In creating their choice sets, students may use resources from postsecondary institutions, such as course catalogs and campus visits, as well as support from family members and school professionals. Webb suggests that it is especially important for students to consider the types of disability support services available at the postsecondary institutions that they are considering, and recommends that students reach out to disability service coordinators at colleges in order to understand what services may be provided. After they've gathered information about the available services and connected with campus representatives, the educators on students' transition and IEP teams can help students to

identify college service options that are a good fit for their individual learning goals. With all of this information in hand, students should complete the selection stage by ranking the institutions in their choice set in order to prioritize their applications.

In the fourth stage, students move on to applying to specific postsecondary institutions, including completing applications for financial aid if needed. This stage is of particular interest in this dissertation project, and is noticeably absent from Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model. In contrast, Webb provides guidance for students on how to approach the multiple pieces of college applications that many schools require, including determining what documents beyond the application form are needed (transcripts, test scores, recommendations, etc.), compiling a list of application information that may be needed on multiple forms, and approaching essay writing if an essay is required. Webb also recommends that parents and school professionals assist students in creating detailed checklists and timelines that break down each piece of an application into small parts, such as steps that a student can take to ask for and obtain teacher recommendations. The application stage concludes with students either being accepted into an institution from their choice set or reevaluating the selection and application stage with their support team to determine alternative options if they are not accepted into any of the colleges in their initial choice set. The final stage of Webb's model, enrolling, occurs when students select a college to attend and enroll, although Webb does not provide any details or explication of what this stage entails.

While many of the stages of Webb's (2000) model align with Hossler and Gallagher's (1987), there are a few important distinctions. At each stage of the process, Webb acknowledges that students with disabilities may have unique factors to consider as

they make decisions. For example, as they explore and prepare for various college options, students will need to consider the types of academic support that they need to be successful in the college preparatory courses offered by their high schools and determine whether such courses are viable options for them. Like Hossler and Gallagher, Webb notes the importance of parental guidance and support in the college choice process; to this, she adds the critical importance of school support personnel who may be heavily involved in planning academic programs and providing resources through special education processes for disabled students. The OPEN model also expands the college search phase into the multiple steps of exploring, selecting, and applying, acknowledging the importance of the application process in providing students with access to college options, or conversely limiting those options, depending on how successful students are in the application stage. Although Webb's model is based primarily on research with students with learning disabilities, she suggests that guidance offered in the OPEN model can serve as a valuable resource for disabled students more broadly. Given that the stages of the OPEN model take into consideration the implications of special education law and services provided to all students with IEPs in the K-12 public education system, the detailed framework that she provides for thinking about college decisions is relevant at some level for any disabled student who participates in special education programs, regardless of disability category.

It is important to note that although the central tenets of both Webb's (2000) and Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) models are still relevant for students today, these models are dated. The college application process and the admissions landscape has changed significantly since Webb developed the OPEN model, and even more so since Hossler

and Gallagher proposed their three stages. For example, Webb notes that students may have to obtain applications from each of their schools, a practice that has largely disappeared since the rise of the Common and Coalition applications. Hossler and Gallagher's model focuses on the role of college yield activities in students' decision-making processes, but fails to account for the impact of the actual admissions process through which students' postsecondary options will be narrowed by the number of acceptances they receive. Additionally, the average number of applications submitted per student has risen steadily over the past few decades (Eagan et al., 2016), suggesting that students in general may be approaching the application process in different ways than previous generations. The COVID-19 pandemic has also reshaped the ways that both students and admissions professionals have approached the college admission process in the past few years (Ezarik, 2022; Smith, 2020). Finally, enrollment in postsecondary education for students with disabilities has increased since these models were developed (Newman et al., 2010), which suggests that more disabled students are considering college as a viable option and are navigating the college choice process, potentially in new or different ways depending on how college and high school environments have changed. To this last point, Perna's (2006) model of college choice provides a framework for thinking about the role of students' context in their college decision-making processes.

Perna's (2006) Model of College Choice

Perna's (2006) model of college choice situates a human capital model of decision-making within four layers of context that shape individuals' college decisions, blending an economic and sociological approach to college choice. Perna places an

economic model of human capital investment at the center of the choice process, suggesting that students make decisions about going to college by comparing the costs (including actual costs like tuition and opportunity costs like forgone earnings) with the monetary and non-monetary benefits of attending college. In making this cost-benefit analysis, students will take into consideration their academic preparation and achievement (demand for college) as well as the resources available to them to pay for college, including family income and financial aid. Access to information about college costs, benefits, and financial aid are important in this part of the model, and differential access to such information will influence the way that students approach their college decisions. Using whatever information is available to them, students will evaluate the costs and benefits of their college options and make a decision about whether and where to enroll. This process is most closely aligned with the final stages of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) and Webb's (2000) models, described as "choice" and "enrolling," respectively.

While Perna (2006) suggests that an individual's choice to attend college is ultimately based on this cost-benefit analysis, the model situates this decision within four levels of nested social context that influence the way that an individual understands and assesses the benefits and costs of a college education, the supply of resources that an individual has available in making college decisions, and the individual's demand for higher education based on their prior academic experiences. These layers of context help to explain the variation in college choice decisions between individuals who otherwise share similar demographic or socioeconomic characteristics. The four nested social contexts are: the individual's habitus, or internalized beliefs, values, and perceptions;

school and community context, including available resources and structural supports/barriers; higher education context, or the ways that postsecondary institutions influence college choice; and the larger social, economic, and policy context in which the individual lives.

The first layer, habitus, is shaped by a student's demographic characteristics, including gender and race, as well as by the student's access to social and cultural capital. Sociological models suggest that cultural knowledge about college processes are connected to the dominant social class, as are access to social networks that support students in navigating these processes. Thus the more dominant cultural and social capital that a student possesses, the more prepared and informed a student will be to make college decisions. These factors also influence the amount of personal resources that a student has available during the college choice process.

The second and third layers of the model, school and higher education contexts, acknowledge the impact that institutions have on students' college choice. Similar to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), Perna (2006) highlights the ways that institutions interact with students and shape students' college-related behaviors. At the school and community context level, the amount and type of academic, social, and other college-related resources that a student's school has available all influence the college choice process. This includes the amount of time school counselors spend on college counseling activities, the strength and structure of the curriculum, and the social networks that exist among parents and educators at the school. Perna also highlights that structural supports or barriers at the school level may provide differential access to college resources for different students. For example, students and families who are less familiar with

navigating bureaucratic school processes will be at a disadvantage, as will students who have not formed relationships with school counselors and teachers, who serve as both gatekeepers and sources of support.

In the higher education contextual layer, institutional characteristics, location, marketing, and admissions processes all shape the way students approach their college decisions. As Hossler and Gallagher (1987) also point out, Perna (2006) suggests that postsecondary institutions can serve as important sources of information for students through targeted outreach or passively through geographic proximity to students' homes or schools. When searching for potential colleges, students will also look for institutions with characteristics that match their personal preferences and needs. This idea aligns with Webb's (2000) suggestion that students with disabilities should pay close attention to the disability-related services provided by a college when creating their choice set. Additionally, postsecondary institution admission policies and practices will impact both the schools to which students apply and the schools at which they enroll, since students are likely to apply to schools to which they think they will be admitted (based on criteria like standardized test scores or grades) and will only be able to consider enrollment at colleges to which they ultimately are admitted.

The outermost layer of the model takes into account how larger social, economic, and policy trends shape college decisions. Changing demographics, the educational attainment of the population, the unemployment rate, and policies around tuition, financial aid, affirmative action, and K-12 resources all have the potential to influence the other layers of context around college choice, including the cost-benefit analysis that students make at the center of the model. For example, federal and state policies around

financial aid may change the ways that colleges recruit students as well as the ways that high school counselors provide college information to students, ultimately impacting students' decisions at multiple levels beyond just influencing students' assessment of college costs (Perna, 2010).

By including both sociological and economic factors, Perna's (2006) model illustrates the complexity of the college choice process and points out the many actors who directly or indirectly shape this process for students. Importantly, the nested layers of social context also demonstrate how each level of context shapes the other levels of context within it. Thus the model creates the space for thinking about the ways that larger social constructs, such as the social and cultural meaning of disability, impact not only disabled students' enrollment decisions at the center of the model but also the higher education and secondary school contexts in which students move through the college choice process. For example, Kimball et al. (2016) suggest that disability stigma has the potential to impact disability public policy in the outer layer of context, but can also have a direct impact on the lived experiences of students and the formation of their personal beliefs and values. Although Perna does not directly address the applicability of her model to disabled students, the nested layers of context lend themselves well to understanding the impact of various social phenomena, such as disability stigma, on college choice.

Conceptualizing College Choice for Disabled Students

All of the choice models described acknowledge that there are numerous factors that influence students' college-related decisions. Research on factors such as college expectations, academic preparation, structural supports and barriers, finances, and the

influence of disability stigma suggests that there may be differences between the experiences of students with and without disabilities. In order to better identify how these factors may inform a model of college choice specifically aimed at understanding the choice experiences of students with disabilities, I briefly examine the literature related to elements of college choice in general and in relation to students with disabilities specifically in the sections below before proposing a conceptual model that combines both Webb's (2000) and Perna's (2006) models of college choice.

College Expectations

Although slightly different in meaning, the terms college expectations and college aspirations are often used interchangeably in the literature on college choice and describe students' plans or intentions to participate in postsecondary education (Perna, 2006). College expectations are often used to describe students' predisposition to attend college prior to beginning the search phase of the college choice process, but students' college aspirations may fluctuate throughout high school (DesJardins et al., 2019) and may play a role in all aspects of the choice process as students navigate their college search and decide what level of institution and ultimately which institution to attend. DesJardins et al. (2019) highlight the importance of accounting for students' college aspirations, as the aspiration stage of the choice process is "a necessary condition for enrolling in college" (p. 267). Data on college expectations has demonstrated that expectations vary by race, family income, and levels of prior academic preparation, among other factors (Chen et al., 2010). McDonough (2005) suggests that college expectations are also influenced by school culture, including whether college attendance is a normative expectation among other students and families and whether college-going is promoted by school educators.

Additionally, college expectations can influence students' career aspirations, or vice versa (Beal & Crockett, 2013), and research has suggested that uncertain career aspirations are correlated with a lower likelihood of college enrollment (Edwin et al., 2022).

Research has also consistently shown that students with disabilities tend to have lower college expectations than their nondisabled peers. Data from the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 shows that ninth graders who received special education services were more than twice as likely (30% compared to 12%) to expect to receive a high school credential as their highest level of education and were less likely to expect to receive a bachelor's degree or higher (34% compared to 62%) as compared to their peers who did not receive special education services (Hinz et al., 2017). In their study of how students' college aspirations change over the course of high school, Desjardins et al. (2019) found that students with learning or physical disabilities were less likely than their peers to aspire to earning a four-year college degree in both ninth and eleventh grades. Not only do students with disabilities appear to have lower college expectations throughout high school, some evidence suggests that their college expectations may actually decrease over the course of their high school experiences. Hitchings et al. (2005) found that while 62 percent of disabled high school students in tenth grade indicated an interest in pursuing community college and ten percent indicated an interest in attending a four-year college, by twelfth grade only 35 percent of disabled students still planned to attend a community college and only two percent wanted to attend a four-year institution.

Moreover, parents and teachers can play an important role in influencing students' college expectations. Cheatham and Elliott (2013) found that not only were students in

special education less likely than their peers to expect to go to college (70% compared to 89%), but the parents of students receiving special education services were also less likely to expect their children to go to college than parents of students who were not in special education (56% compared to 80%). Similarly, Shifrer (2013) found that both teachers and parents had lower educational expectations for students who had been labeled with a learning disability (LD) than for non-labeled students, and that these lower educational expectations were at least partially attributable to teacher and parent perceptions of these students as disabled. Additionally, the lower educational expectations of their teachers and parents contributed to the lower expectations that labeled twelfth graders held for themselves, suggesting that the college expectations of important adults can impact students' own postsecondary aspirations (Shifrer, 2013). Hitchings et al. (2005) draw a similar conclusion, positing that disabled students' declining interest in postsecondary education over the course of high school may be due in part to the attitudes and actions of parents and school professionals in relation to college-related preparation.

Academic Preparation

A strong academic foundation is a critical part of preparing students for college (Perna, 2005). Scholars have consistently drawn connections between taking rigorous, college-preparatory coursework, academic achievement, and college enrollment, especially enrollment in four-year colleges (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; González et al., 2003; Perna, 2005). Students with strong academic preparation in high school are likely to anticipate greater benefits to postsecondary education and to receive positive reinforcement from significant others (parents, teachers, peers) in regards to enrolling in

college (Perna, 2005), and a student's academic preparation and prior coursework influence the types of colleges to which they apply and to which they are ultimately admitted (Hughes et al., 2019). Academic preparation has also been linked to the timing of enrollment, with students who delay college enrollment having lower levels of academic preparation than students who enrolled in college immediately after high school (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007).

Students with disabilities are less likely than their non-disabled peers to receive the rigorous academic preparation associated with access to and success in college. Data from the 2012/14 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study shows that students with disabilities are less likely to take an advanced placement class in high school (37% compared to 48%) and are more likely to report taking at least one remedial course in college (42% compared to 34%; Hinz et al., 2017), which suggests that their high school academic preparation may be insufficient for the rigor of coursework at some colleges. Another study found a 19 percentage point difference in the probability that high school students labeled with learning disabilities would complete a full college-preparatory curriculum in comparison to their peers, even after accounting for academic and social differences (Shifrer et al., 2013). For example, only 18 percent of LD-labeled students completed coursework in two of the three major sciences (biology, chemistry, and physics) as recommended for college preparation, compared to about 60 percent of non-labeled students. The researchers also found that students labeled with LD had poorer academic histories than their non-labeled peers, started high school in lower level science and math courses, and had more negative academic attitudes (Shifrer et al., 2013). Additionally, as mentioned previously, Hitchings et al. (2005) found that disabled

students with an initial interest in postsecondary education often did not take the necessary coursework to prepare for college or switched from a college preparatory curriculum to less rigorous coursework in later years of high school. Only four of the 79 students in their study who initially indicated interest in attending a two-year or four-year college enrolled in college preparatory coursework at the beginning of high school. By the end of eleventh grade, only one student was still enrolled in a college preparatory curriculum.

Researchers have also found connections between educational setting (type of school and type of classroom) and academic preparation among students with disabilities. Nagle and colleagues (2016) found that deaf and hard of hearing students who attended special schools, including schools that only served students with disabilities, took more vocational credits, fewer courses in sciences and foreign languages, and less rigorous math courses than deaf and hard of hearing students in regular schools. They found the same pattern when comparing all deaf and hard of hearing students to students in the general population, suggesting that deaf and hard of hearing students overall take less rigorous courses than their peers and thus are at a significant academic disadvantage for college coursework. Such course-taking patterns can also lead to student perceptions of their own disadvantage; a group of students with disabilities at community colleges reported that a lack of academic preparation in high school made it harder for them to succeed in their initial college coursework (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009). Additional research has demonstrated that there is also a relationship between enrollment in coursework in the general education curriculum and college enrollment for disabled students. Rojewski and colleagues (2015) found that students with learning disabilities or

emotional behavioral disorders who earned at least 80 percent of their high school credits in general education inclusion classrooms were twice as likely to be enrolled in some postsecondary education two years after high school than students with these disabilities who spent more time in separate special education classes.

Secondary School Structural Supports or Barriers

A number of factors related to a student's secondary school environment can play an important role in the college choice process. Although there is little empirical research that explores how systems and structures in secondary schools may support or impede the college choice process of disabled students, Kimball et al. (2016) suggest that students with disabilities may encounter unique structural barriers to college access in the high school context. In addition to the ways that access to a college-preparatory curriculum are structured in schools, two factors of potential importance in the high school environment are the quality and availability of college counseling services and the process used to form students' postsecondary transition plans as part of their legally-mandated special education services.

School counselors can influence the college choice process for all students through the ways that they provide college-related information, advise students on college processes, communicate college options and alternatives, reinforce college expectations, and work to establish a school's college-going culture (McDonough, 2005). However, school counselors' availability to provide college counseling services is limited in many schools by high student-to-counselor ratios and by the wide range of responsibilities counselors have in addition to college counseling (McDonough, 2005; Perna et al., 2008). Counselors and college advisors may also be limited in their ability to

provide specific types of college resources, such as financial aid advising, because of a lack of training or knowledge about such resources (Clayton, 2019; Perna et al., 2008). Additionally, school, district, and state-level budgets and policies concerning counseling can impact the ways in which college counseling services are prioritized or delivered in high schools (Perna et al., 2008).

Furthermore college counseling services at most schools are shaped by the normative culture of college expectations and are targeted towards the normative student in the school's population (McDonough, 2005). Since many disabled students are unlikely to fit the profile of the normative student, college counseling services may not meet their individualized needs. Additionally, since many students with disabilities have lower college expectations than their peers (Cheatham & Elliott, 2013; DesJardins et al., 2019; Hitchings et al., 2005), they may not receive the types of counseling that would include college as a postsecondary option. McDonough (2005) suggests that students "for whom the expectations [to go to college] do not exist are never given the chance to make it to college because they are denied the support, information, and resources necessary to get there" (p. 75). The support and resources that counselors can provide are especially important for disabled students, who may need to take additional factors into consideration as they explore postsecondary options (Webb, 2000). In order to better support students with disabilities through the college choice process, counselors can help students collect information about college disability services, educate them about differences in disability law at the secondary and postsecondary level, and assist them in getting a comprehensive psychoeducational evaluation prior to high school departure,

which students may need to access disability accommodations in college (Skinner &

Lindstrom, 2003).

The creation of a student's postsecondary transition plan is another place where

school personnel can provide important college preparatory support for students with

disabilities. Under the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, schools must provide disabled

students with specific services, including the development of an Individual Transition

Plan (ITP), to support their transition to a career or postsecondary education after high

school (Trainor, 2008). These plans should be based on students' interests and needs, and

the formation of transition plans should include both students and their families (Trainor,

2008). However, some research suggests that students with disabilities may not be

substantially participating in the formation of transition plans, and that students'

academic programs may not be well-aligned to students' postsecondary goals (Lipscomb

et al., 2018; Trainor, 2005). For example, one study found that while a group of 15

disabled students all expressed interest in pursuing postsecondary education, ten of the

students were exempted from state exit exams that were needed for college admission

(Trainor, 2005). Moreover, results from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-

2012 suggest that participation in transition planning has decreased over time, with a

lower percentage of students with IEPs and their parents reporting participating in

transition planning activities in 2012 than in 2003 (Lipscomb et al., 2018). Other

researchers found that the postsecondary goals listed in IEPs for high school students

with disabilities were more likely to include career-oriented rather than college-oriented

language, suggesting that the educators who participated in postsecondary planning with

disabled students were emphasizing career planning over college preparation (Lombardi

et al., 2017). Data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study- 2012 also show that students with IEPs are less likely than their non-disabled peers to participate in key transition activities that lead to postsecondary education, such as taking college entrance exams or taking a college course for credit during high school (Lipscomb et al., 2018). Teachers and counselors may need to start the transition planning process earlier with disabled students in order to better prepare them for postsecondary education options and to ensure that students' goals and career ambitions are accurately reflected in their transition plans.

Financial Factors

The costs of college (such as tuition and room and board), the amount of personal financial resources a student has, and the availability of financial aid are often cited as important factors for college choice and enrollment (Avery & Hoxby, 2003; Castleman & Long, 2013; Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Perna, 2006; Somers et al., 2006). In terms of financial aid, the source and form of the aid, such as whether aid is provided through grants rather than loans, as well as the goals, eligibility criteria, and complexity of applying for aid programs all play a role in how financial aid impacts students' college decision-making (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Perna, 2010). Financial aid provided by institutions or through state programs can influence not only whether a student enrolls in college, but also where a student enrolls (Harper & Griffin, 2011; Perna & Titus, 2004; Zhang et al., 2016). Furthermore, financial aid is an especially important factor for students from low-income backgrounds when making enrollment decisions, since they have fewer personal and familial resources to pay for college (Avery & Hoxby, 2003; Castleman & Long, 2013; Perna & Kurban, 2013).

There is very little research available on how students with disabilities take financial factors into account when navigating the college choice process. Some research suggests that postsecondary enrollment patterns by income level for students in special education mirror patterns in the general population, with students from high-income families being more likely to enroll in any postsecondary education and in four-year colleges than their low-income peers (Cheatham & Elliott, 2013; Newman et al., 2010). Although the impact of financial factors on the college choice process may not be especially different for disabled students, Cheatham et al. (2013) suggest that families of disabled students may incur unique costs in supporting their disabled children as a result of their disabilities and thus may have more financial need than other families when it comes to postsecondary education. Students identified for special education services are also disproportionately from low-income families (Cheatham & Elliott, 2013; National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020), which might make financial aid particularly important for these students. Additionally, students in special education who reported that the costs of college were very important to them in enrollment decisions are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education (Cheatham & Elliott, 2013), suggesting that college costs and family resources are important in the college choice process of disabled students.

Disability Stigma

There is broad agreement among disability scholars and researchers that disabled people experience social stigma (Kimball et al., 2016). Stigma occurs when people are labeled and stereotyped due to perceived differences from dominant cultural norms, then socially separated, discriminated against, and denied social status as a result (Link &

Phelan, 2001). Research on disability stigma in educational contexts suggests that educators, parents, and students are generally aware of disability stigma in schools and are often complicit in the reproduction and perpetuation of such stigma (Albert et al., 2016; Eisenman & Tascione, 2002; Lalvani, 2015). Given the prevalence of disability stigma in American society, it is important to take stigma into account when considering how disabled students make decisions about college. Kimball et al. (2016) go so far as to suggest that "a model [of college choice] that considers stigma as a mediating influence on all other layers may be better positioned to address the unique experiences of students with disabilities" (p. 131).

Educators' beliefs about disability shape their interactions with disabled students and their perceptions of students' abilities (Ware, 2002), which may impact students' college choice processes and their educational experiences more broadly. Teachers may fail to recognize the impact that school environments can have on students with disabilities, instead attributing students' positive and negative learning outcomes to individual students' personal characteristics, behaviors, and disability-related impairments (Lalvani, 2015). For example, one study found that teachers described students with disabilities as inherently different from other students, attributed their difficulties in the classroom to their disabilities rather than to the attitudes and behaviors of non-disabled students and educators, and expressed beliefs that students with certain types of disabilities should not be placed in the general education classroom (Lalvani, 2015). Parents have also described beliefs that general education teachers are less willing to work with disabled students and that removal from the general education classroom

can lead to greater stigma for disabled children in the school environment (Lalvani, 2015).

Beyond the influence of stigma in the school context, disability stigma also likely affects the way that disabled students approach the college application process. Students may have concerns about disclosing a disability in their college applications due to worries about the confidentiality of disclosure or the negative impact that disclosure may have on their admission decision (Eccles et al., 2018). Students who complete college applications at school may also choose not to disclose a disability on their applications if they want to hide their disability from teachers or peers (Eccles et al., 2018). Other students may be aware of the risks of disclosing a disability on the college application, but may choose to do so as a way to distinguish themselves (Vidali, 2007). In her examination of the college application essays of three students with learning disabilities, Vidali (2007) found that two of the students described their disabilities as personal struggles that they had to overcome in order to be successful in school, describing disability in a way that aligned with normative cultural narratives to accommodate readers who might lack experience with disability. In contrast the third student acknowledged the social context of disability in educational settings, emphasizing the institutional barriers that shaped her application as a person with a learning disability, and challenged negative perceptions of disability by asserting her self-worth as a disabled individual. Despite these different approaches, all three students described being aware of the risks of disability discrimination as a result of disclosure.

Other Potential Factors

Research has shown that parental involvement can be an important factor in the college choice process. Parental expectations for their children's postsecondary attainment, conversations with children about educational matters, and involvement in school events and processes all have been connected to college enrollment (Perna & Titus, 2005; Ross, 2016; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). Parental participation in school functions and communication around volunteering and academics have been positively associated with students' postsecondary enrollment, whereas parental communication with schools around disciplinary infractions and other school problems has been negatively associated with college enrollment (Perna & Titus, 2005; Ross, 2016). For students who receive special education services, parents may have additional occasions to connect with school professionals during annual IEP meetings or with questions about elements of their child's special education placement. On the other hand, they may also receive more negative communication from schools, since students with disabilities receive more disciplinary action at schools than their non-disabled peers (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2021). Similarly, data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study- 2012 showed mixed results regarding parental involvement, finding that parents of students with IEPs were more likely to attend parent-teacher conferences and to provide homework support, but were less likely than other parents to volunteer at school or attend other school events (Lipscomb et al., 2018). Thus while there may be more reason or occasion for parents of children with disabilities to be involved in the education of their children, more research is needed to understand whether this is true and how parents interact with their children around college preparation in particular.

It is also important to recognize that the intersections of race and socioeconomic status with disability matter in the college choice process (Cheatham & Elliott, 2013; Murray et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2010). In general, students from low-income and racially-minoritized backgrounds are less likely to be placed in rigorous academic coursework within their schools and often attend schools that offer less rigorous academic programs, leading to lower levels of academic preparation (Perna, 2005; Perna & Titus, 2005). College expectations (Chen et al., 2010) and patterns in college preparation and application behaviors (Holzman et al., 2019; Roderick et al., 2011) also vary by race and family income, as does parental involvement (Perna & Titus, 2005; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). It is no surprise, then, that enrollment patterns for students with disabilities vary by level of family income and race, with high-income and white students being more likely to enroll in postsecondary education generally and in four-year colleges specifically than their low-income or racially minoritized peers (Newman et al., 2010). Moreover, students from minoritized racial backgrounds and low-income families are disproportionately identified for special education services and experience greater separation and more disciplinary action in the school system than their peers when they are placed in special education (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020; Skiba et al., 2008). These factors suggest that there is likely a complex relationship between disability and a student's other demographic characteristics, which may complicate the college choice process in ways that have not been explored by previous research. The relevance of disability-related factors in the process may be less important for some students than these other demographic characteristics (Fleming & Fairweather, 2012).

For this dissertation project, it is also important to consider the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which drastically changed the educational experiences of public school students at the end of the 2019-2020 academic year and over the course of the 2021-2022 academic year. While the economic, social, and educational changes that resulted from the pandemic have impacted all students, these changes may have disproportionately affected learning and school processes for students with disabilities. The closure of schools for months at the beginning of the pandemic led to the cessation of many in-person supplemental services that students with disabilities had previously received at school in accordance with their IEPs, and many schools failed to make their remote or online instruction platforms accessible for disabled students (National Council on Disability, 2021). Given this, it is unsurprising that early research shows that students with disabilities struggled more than their nondisabled peers to adjust to remote or hybrid learning environments (Becker et al., 2020; Morando-Rhim & Ekin, 2021). Additionally, the pandemic may have triggered worse mental health and behavioral issues for disabled students than nondisabled students (Morando-Rhim & Ekin, 2021; National Council on Disability, 2021). All of these factors likely contributed to learning loss and less structural support for students receiving special education services, which may have impacted their academic preparation and their ability to navigate college processes even after schools returned to near-normal functioning.

Finally, while there is limited research about the ways that disabled students navigate the college choice process, there is one study that examined the ways that students with learning disabilities navigate decisions about college choice. Mercer's (2012) dissertation work found that a group of students with learning disabilities who

were attending community colleges went through the same phases of college choice, according to Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model, as other students, but that they engaged in the choice process passively and without much support from school personnel. The participants in the study tended to begin exploring college options late in their high school careers and chose options that were convenient or suggested by others rather than actively seeking out colleges that might match their interests and goals. Since Mercer only interviewed students who were attending community colleges, these findings may be more reflective of the community college population in general rather than students with disabilities in particular. The current research differs from Mercer's work in two ways: (1) it focuses on high school participants and their lived experiences *as they move through* the college choice process, rather than their retrospective reflections on the process; and (2) it uses the lens of social/cultural models of disability to specifically question the impact of disability labels and special education experiences on the college choice process for disabled students.

A Combined Conceptual Model

Given the many factors that go into the complicated process of college choice, I believe that a combination of Webb's (2000) and Perna's (2006) models (Figure 1) is the best way to approach this study of college choice for students who receive special education services through the school system. Together, these models help me to consider how students move through the different phases of college choice while acknowledging that each phase of the college choice process is influenced by a student's multiple contextual environments. Some of the contextual aspects that Perna includes in her model may be especially important for students with disabilities, such as structural barriers in

the school system that differentiate access to the curriculum and college counseling services at the secondary school level or the availability of disability support services on campus at postsecondary institutions (Kimball et al., 2016). Perna's model has the additional benefit of highlighting the influence of policy on student decisions, which would include disability laws at the secondary and postsecondary levels that dictate the processes for disabled students to access accommodations and educational support services (Kimball et al., 2016). However, instead of centering the economic cost-benefit analysis at the heart of Perna's model, I center the five-stage choice process outlined by Webb to illustrate how every step of a student's college decision-making process is influenced by their multiple social and environmental contexts.

In the outermost layer of this combined model, policies, social and cultural ideas about disability, and economic norms about what constitutes productive labor in a neoliberal, capitalist society all may influence the college choice process for students with disabilities. These larger contexts will shape students' college and career aspirations, the support they receive at different levels of education, and both students' and educators' understandings of disability at the postsecondary and secondary levels. For example, the differences between the educational services required under IDEA at the secondary school level and the accommodations required under ADA and Section 504 will impact the support that disabled students receive in college and in high school (Madaus & Shaw, 2004, 2006), and may impact the way that students interact with institutional agents in these two contexts as they explore, search for, and apply to colleges. Additionally, state policies around postsecondary transition planning for students with disabilities will influence the way that secondary schools structure their special education processes,
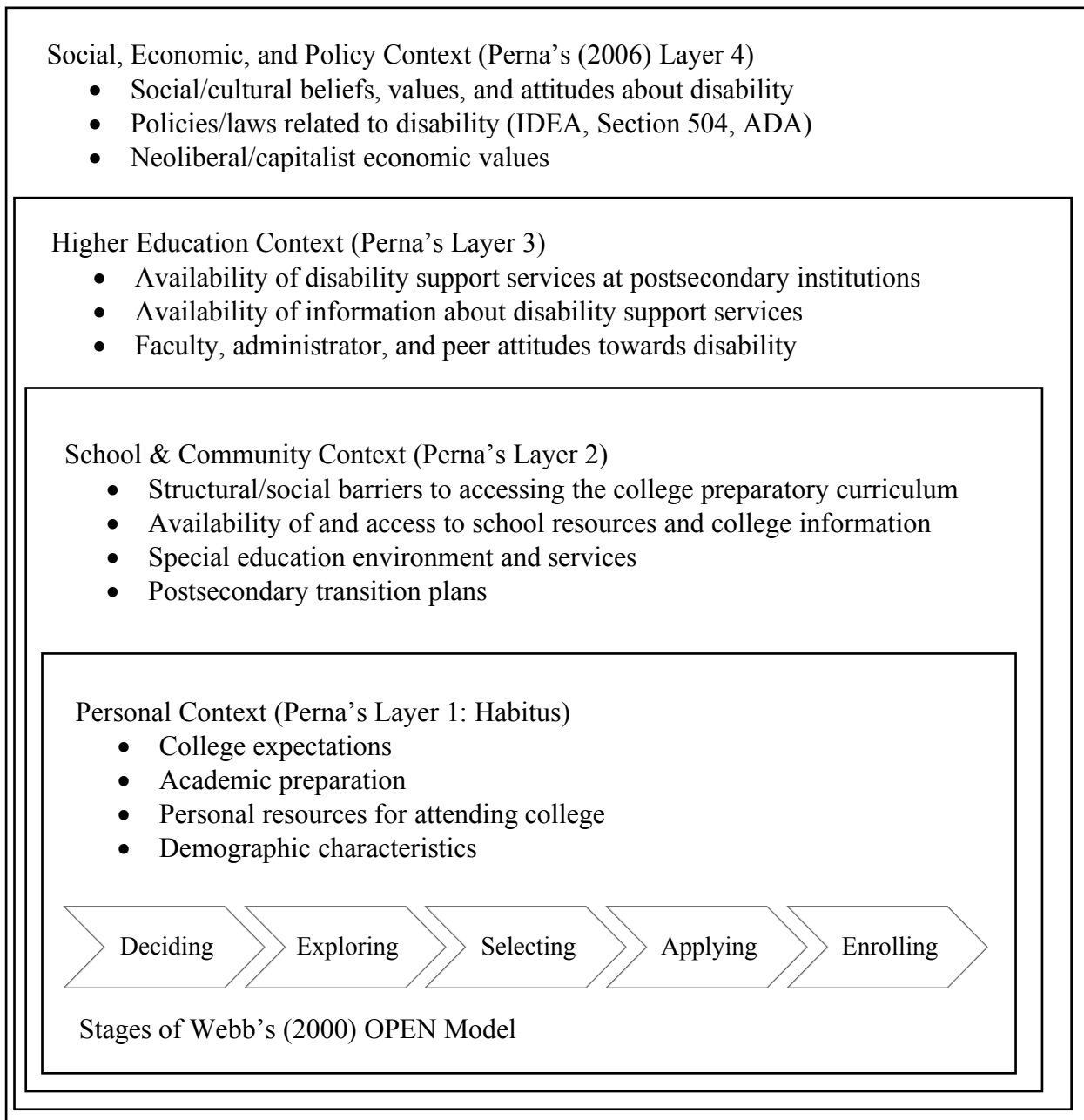
which in turn may impact when and how disabled students start to think about college and explore postsecondary options.

In the higher education contextual layer, students' ability to access information about disability services at various institutions and their understandings of the campus climate for students with disabilities may be major factors in the college choice process. The ease with which students are able to clearly identify what services are available to them may make particular institutions more or less appealing, especially at institutions that advertise programs directed specifically to disabled students. Students may also be attracted to institutions that have a strong culture of disability support or student activism around disability, which may suggest that they will experience less stigma from peers and faculty. However, for students who do not plan to disclose a disability at college or who wish to distance themselves from their disability label, these factors may be far less important.

The school and community context and the personal context layers of the model have the most immediate impact on high school students with disabilities in the college choice process, and are the primary focus of this study. The factors that influence students in these layers include college expectations, academic preparation, personal resources (including financial resources), access to school resources and college preparatory curriculum, and the structure of special education programs. Disabled students who do not have a personal expectation of attending college are unlikely to progress in the college choice process past the first stage. Academic preparation for students with disabilities is a direct result of the services to which they have access and the curricular program in which the school places them, all of which are built into the

structure of the special education program. Access to college-related school supports, such as college counseling services and college information, is also important for students with disabilities who plan to pursue postsecondary education, but may be limited by counselors' ability to provide such support.

All of these factors are influenced by social and cultural beliefs about disability at each level of the model. The way that disability is understood and has historically been managed in educational spaces influences the beliefs that students, parents, and educators have about what is possible and realistic for disabled students in the secondary and postsecondary environments. For example, disability stigma may lead to lower expectations of parents and teachers (Shifrer, 2013), who may provide less or different support for disabled students in considering postsecondary options. Beliefs about disability may also lead to fewer programs to support students with disabilities at the postsecondary level, which in turn may signal to disabled students that college is not a realistic possibility for them. If students internalize social beliefs that disability signifies inferiority and that physical or neurological diversity is a sign of personal deficit, then they may also limit their postsecondary options to what they perceive as socially acceptable – which historically has been vocational track over academic track educational opportunities (Winzer, 2009). Thus, the way that disability is socially and culturally constructed in relation to education becomes a key factor in the model, shaping a student's experience at each stage of the college choice process and within each layer of context.

Figure 1

A Combined Model of College Choice for Students with Disabilities

Social, Economic, and Policy Context (Perna's (2006) Layer 4)
- Social/cultural beliefs, values, and attitudes about disability
- Policies/laws related to disability (IDEA, Section 504, ADA)
- Neoliberal/capitalist economic values

Higher Education Context (Perna's Layer 3)
- Availability of disability support services at postsecondary institutions
- Availability of information about disability support services
- Faculty, administrator, and peer attitudes towards disability

School & Community Context (Perna's Layer 2)
- Structural/social barriers to accessing the college preparatory curriculum
- Availability of and access to school resources and college information
- Special education environment and services
- Postsecondary transition plans

Personal Context (Perna's Layer 1: Habitus)
- College expectations
- Academic preparation
- Personal resources for attending college
- Demographic characteristics

Deciding ⟩ Exploring ⟩ Selecting ⟩ Applying ⟩ Enrolling

Stages of Webb's (2000) OPEN Model

Adapted from Perna's (2006) *Proposed conceptual model of student college choice* and Webb's (2000) *Opportunities in Postsecondary Education through Networking model*

I use the combination of these two models to organize my approach to understanding how students with disabilities make decisions about going to college. Each phase of Webb's (2000) model outlines distinct activities that students may undertake during their college choice process, which helps me to distinguish how my student participants move between different phases at different points in time, while Perna's (2006) model reminds me to consider the contextual influence of social and cultural constructions of disability at multiple levels on each phase of the decision-making process. It is important to note that while Webb's (2000) stages of college choice are portrayed as linear in this model, students may experience college choice in nonlinear ways, such as progressing through multiple stages simultaneously, skipping stages, or returning to previous stages during the course of their choice processes. However, this trajectory from deciding to attend college through eventual matriculation is meant to capture the general college choice experience, while leaving room to acknowledge individual variation.

Conclusion

Educational beliefs and practices in relation to students with disabilities have changed significantly throughout American history, from policies of total exclusion to practices that encourage full inclusion for as many students as possible. Now, in an era where postsecondary education is more within reach for disabled students than ever before, discrepancies in higher education access between disabled and nondisabled students suggest that disabled students are experiencing college choice in significantly different ways than their peers. Examining students' college choice experiences with an eye towards the role of social and cultural beliefs about disability and the ways that

educators have historically approached the education of disabled students can provide further insight into these differences.

In considering the factors that influence college choice for students with disabilities, it is important to note that although some trends have been identified through research, the diverse nature of disabilities and their impact on students' educational experiences make it difficult to make generalizations about how disabled students approach this process. Disabled students will have vastly different experiences with impairment and with special education learning environments, even within the same school, depending on the many contexts in which they are situated. However, while each student's experience is likely to be unique, the shared experience of being labeled with a disability through the school system may lead to some commonalities in their college choice processes.

In order to best explore disabled students' experiences with college choice while centering students and the participant-researcher relationship, I use a narrative inquiry methodology in this dissertation, which I will explain in detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This dissertation uses a narrative inquiry methodological approach to better understand the lived experiences of disabled students as they navigate the college choice process, from deciding to go to college through completing college applications, taking into account their experiences in the special education system and their personal understandings of disability. Narrative inquiry is an appropriate choice for studying this topic because it emphasizes the importance of individual experience as a source of knowledge while also accounting for the contextualization of lived experience through larger social and cultural narratives that inform how individuals experience and understand the world. This approach allows me to focus on the stories of individual disabled students – students who are not often asked to share their stories of education – to emphasize the valuable knowledge that these students hold in order to answer my first research question about the lived experience of college choice. Narrative inquiry also creates the space to examine how social, cultural, and institutional narratives of disability shape these experiences as I approach my second research question in regards to how students' experiences with special education and understanding of disability influence their choice processes.

Narrative inquiry is founded on the idea of relational inquiry, which requires the researcher to be continuously attentive to their relationship with and responsibilities to participants (Caine et al., 2013). This centering of ethical relationships in the process is important for working with any participant, but especially in working with students with disabilities, who have been historically marginalized in or excluded from educational spaces. It is also important to note that narrative inquiry requires a distinct approach to

research, based on an ontology of experience, that differs significantly from other

qualitative forms of research that may incorporate narratives but which are based on other

philosophical stances (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Narrative inquiry uses a distinct

approach to data analysis that is based on iteratively composing narratives in

collaboration with participants. While there is no one prescriptive way to carry out a

narrative inquiry methodology, my interpretation of this approach is explained in detail in

the sections below.

Narrative Inquiry

Overview of Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method that centers the lived experience

of participants and views narrative as the best way to represent and make meaning of

experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This means that narrative inquirers not only

represent experience through narrative forms in research findings, but that they

"understand experience as a narratively composed phenomenon" (Clandinin, 2013, p.

16), studying experience as lived and told through stories. Connelly and Clandinin (2006)

best describe this interpretation of experience as story, writing:

> People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they
>
> interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal
>
> through which a person enters the world and by which his or her experience of the
>
> world is interpreted and made personally meaningful… Narrative inquiry, the
>
> study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about
>
> experience… To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view
>
> of experience as phenomenon under study. (p. 477)

This understanding of experience also intimately ties story to identity, as people live and tell "stories to live by" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 21) that shape who they are and who they are becoming over time through their experiences.

Narrative inquiry's philosophical foundations are rooted in John Dewey's pragmatic theory of experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Dewey's view of experience focuses on two criteria, "interaction and continuity enacted in situations" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 12), which give rise to the three narrative commonplaces of sociality, temporality, and place. The first criteria, interaction, arises from an understanding of experience as both personal and social, emphasizing the importance of the individual's experience while also recognizing the influence of social context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Experience always happens in relation to others, and the stories people tell about experience are a product of the social influences on their lives (Clandinin, 2013). Thus narrative inquiry "is also an exploration of the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 18). People live in and are shaped by these larger narratives (Clandinin, 2013). Dewey's second criteria, continuity, suggests that all experiences grow out of past experiences and shape future experiences, requiring attention to the past, present, and implied future in order to make meaning of an experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Through experience both people and environment are changed in relation to one another (Clandinin, 2013). Based on this view of experience, narrative inquiry focuses on understanding experience through a three-dimensional inquiry space comprised of sociality (experiences and stories happen relationally and within cultural, institutional, and familial contexts); temporality (lived

experience and stories are in process, with a continuity between past, present, and future); and place (experiences and stories occur in a physical setting; Clandinin, 2013).

These three commonplaces are at the heart of the narrative inquiry process. When considering sociality, narrative inquirers must pay attention to both the personal and social dimensions of the unfolding experience, looking "inward… toward the internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions" as well as "outward" towards the social environment (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). Temporality requires the narrative inquirer to describe experience and events not only as they presently appear to exist, but with consideration to the personal and social historical context that led to the experience as well as with imagination toward the implications of the experience for the future:

> Narrative inquirers would not say 'a person is such and such as way.' They would, rather, say that a particular person had a certain kind of history, associated with particular present behaviors or actions that might seem to be projecting in particular ways in to the future. (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479)

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to the role of temporality in the inquiry as thinking in terms of "forward" and "backward." In addition to considering the directions of inward, outward, forward, and backward, the dimension of place adds an understanding of the physical location and context of experience, describing "where characters are formed and live out their stories and where cultural and social context play constraining and enabling roles" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 8). Place may change throughout the inquiry or involve multiple physical locations, and the narrative inquirer needs to reflect on the impact of each place on the inquiry experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Taken together, these three commonplaces inform the concept of the "relational" nature of narrative inquiry, which Clandinin (2013) describes as the relationships between people, environments, time periods, events, and emotions, including "the relational in our cultural, institutional, linguistic, and familial narratives" (p. 23).

Narrative inquiry is founded on an ontology of experience, meaning that human experience is "the first and most fundamental reality we have" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 44). Experience, and thus reality, is understood in narrative terms as relational, temporal, and continuous; as such, narrative inquirers do not separate the reality of experience from the narrative representation as it is lived and told (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). This ontology requires a deep ethical commitment from narrative inquirers to the relational aspects of the inquiry, and emphasizes that a researcher's responsibility is always first and foremost to the participants (Caine et al., 2013). Researchers must also reflect and draw upon their personal experience in coming to the inquiry and stay attentive to their experiences throughout in order to "carefully consider who they are, and who they are becoming, in the research puzzle" (Caine et al., 2013, p. 577). The ontology of experience also indicates an epistemological commitment to experience as an important source of knowledge and understanding (Caine et al., 2013; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Since knowledge is experientially generated and composed, narrative inquirers recognize that they are limited in their ability to represent experience beyond the "partial, complicit, context-dependent conditions" in which we live and work (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009, p. 601). All research texts, then, are limited interpretations of what the researcher has experienced and chosen to emphasize (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

Rationale for a Narrative Inquiry Approach

I have chosen narrative inquiry as a methodology for this dissertation because its ontological and epistemological foundation align with my own beliefs about experience and research. Narrative inquiry aligns with my belief that lived experience and the stories we tell about experience are important ways to construct knowledge and make meaning of our world; in the words of author Thomas King, "[t]he truth about stories is that that's all we are" (2005, p. 2). In working with students from a population that has been marginalized in the education system, I believe that it is critical to listen to their stories and work alongside them to understand how their past and present school experiences have shaped their beliefs about college and what is possible for their futures. I also appreciate that a key element of narrative inquiry is thinking relationally, especially in terms of the collaborative relationship between researcher and participants who are co-constructing the narratives of experiences together (Clandinin, 2013). It is important for researchers to recognize that they are inextricably a part of the story that they compose, rather than an objective observer, and to consider ways in which the researcher can be helpful to participants throughout the collaborative relationship (Clandinin, 2013; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). The idea of being helpful in my research context primarily took shape in the form of application support for my student participants and offering transitional support to students and families after they received college admission decisions. The reciprocity of research relationships is also something that I negotiated both at the beginning of the inquiry when entering my field site as well as throughout the inquiry as I worked in close contact with student participants and school professionals. Furthermore, my commitment to the relational nature of narrative inquiry prompted me to

continuously reflect on how my interactions with students might be shaping their college choice experiences and their stories to live by. As opposed to post-positivist methodologies, narrative inquiry embraces the role of the researcher in shaping the experience under study: "the fact that the inquiry is altering the phenomena under study is not regarded as a methodological problem to be overcome. It is the purpose of the research" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 45). Choosing narrative inquiry allowed me the space to imagine new possibilities for myself as a researcher and for my student participants as the research process unfolded.

Population and Sampling

Since my focus was on students receiving special education services under the provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), my participants were drawn from a public high school in the state of Massachusetts where approximately 19 percent of students receive special education services (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), n.d.). I chose a single high school site in order to gain a better understanding of the school environment, specifically college counseling activities, since narrative inquiry requires attention to the place-based aspects of experience. My inclusion criteria for participants included: (1) students must be in their final year of high school; (2) students must be planning to apply to two-year or four-year colleges; and (3) students must be currently receiving special education services, and have received special education services since at least ninth grade. These criteria allowed me to work with students who were planning to navigate the college choice process during the timeframe of the research and who had received special education services for a large portion of their college choice process, especially since the college choice process

may start long before high school for some students (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Students who are identified with disabilities in the later years of high school may have

already completed many of the stages of the college choice process before their

identification, likely leading to different experiences with special education and

understanding how disability influences their college choice processes.

I did not use categories of disability as a sampling criterion (i.e. only students

with learning disabilities or only students with physical disabilities) because my goal was

to share the narratives of a variety of individual experiences with disability and college

choice. Additionally, since I have conceptualized disability as socially and culturally

constructed for the purposes of my second research question, it is the social labeling

process of being classified as 'disabled' through the special education system that unifies

students in this research project – not their experiences with specific types of impairment,

especially since each student may experience impairment differently.

Prior to recruiting individual student participants, I first underwent the process of

finding a public high school research site. An educator at Middletown high school

expressed interest in working with me as a research partner, so I began the process of

gaining approval from the Middletown School District to conduct my research at the high

school. The school district's research approval process took five months, and my project

start date was delayed at the last minute due to a district administrator revoking and then

reinstating my research permissions at the start of the academic year. As a result my

recruitment timeline was shortened, and my research partner was unable to start sharing

my recruitment materials with students until the end of September. This proved to be

challenging for two reasons. First, my research partner was a full-time employee at the

high school and had extensive responsibilities during the academic year, which limited the amount of time that my research partner could spend on recruitment. The delayed timeline also made recruitment challenging because many students had already begun the college application process and were thus less interested in the possible support that participating in the research might provide them.

Once the school district had granted research approval, my recruitment partner sent out my recruitment materials to students who met all of the eligibility criteria, and then interested students followed up with me directly via email. Due to school policies around student privacy, I could not reach out to students directly until they initiated contact with me, which made broad recruitment challenging. My initial recruitment goal was to find four to six student participants in order to account for any participant withdrawal during the course of the research. Four students initially expressed interest in participating in the project, and three students ultimately signed up to work with me. Although participants signed up at different points in the academic year, all three of my participants continued with the project until its conclusion. Since my participants were under the age of 18 when the project started, I met with each student and one of their parents prior to introduce the research project before obtaining assent from student participants and informed consent from their parents. The relational nature of narrative inquiry stresses the importance of building trusting and collaborative relationships and developing a deep understanding of participants' lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which required the number of participants to be limited in order for such relationships and understandings to develop over the time available for this project.

All three of my participants were White and from middle-class backgrounds, matching the overall demographic of their high school (more details about the research site are explained at the end of this chapter in "place"). My student participants each had been classified with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as well as at least one other disability. ADHD is classified as a "neurobehavioral syndrome" and is diagnosed through a process of identifying signs of inattention and/or hyperactivity and then ruling out other possible causes of these behaviors (Glanzman & Sell, 2013, p. 370). Inattentive behaviors include reluctance "to engage in tasks that require sustained mental effort" and difficulty following through with or finishing schoolwork, while hyperactivity can include fidgeting or impulsivity (Glanzman & Sell, 2013, p. 371). One participant had also been diagnosed with an auditory processing disorder, which is classified as an issue with the functioning of parts of the central auditory neurological system and can present as challenges with listening and understanding in noisy environments, remembering spoken information, and following multistep instructions (Buethe et al., 2013). Another participant had been diagnosed with Autism in addition to ADHD, which is classified as a neurodevelopmental disorder that manifests in the form of repetitive behaviors, communication impairments, and difficulty with socially-reciprocal behaviors (Hyman & Levy, 2013). Some behaviors associated with Autism include impairments in nonverbal behaviors, such as the use of eye contact or gestures in social interaction; delays in the language development; and repetitive motor movements or intense preoccupation with "restricted patterns of interest" (Hyman & Levy, 2013, p. 347). My final student participant had been diagnosed with a range of disabilities, including ADHD, motor ticks, depression, anxiety, and a math-specific learning disability. Specific

mathematics disabilities can manifest in many ways, but are defined by impairment in calculation fluency and mastery of mathematical facts (Lewis et al., 2013).

Data Sources and Collection

I collected data through semi-structured interviews and observations of students as they worked on their college applications between November 2022 and March 2023. This allowed me to capture students' reflections on their experiences as they moved through the college choice process as well as to live the experience of applying to college alongside them, at least partially. Each interview lasted between 20 – 60 minutes and each observation lasted between 30 – 60 minutes. Interviews and observations primarily took place in a private classroom at the students' high school, but several meetings took place either in a private study room at the local public library or via Zoom video-conferencing. I had between two and six meetings with each participant, with the number of interviews and observations varying based on when each student signed up to participate in the research and when each student completed their college application process. I audio-recorded meetings with two of my participants, with their permission, and took detailed notes during meetings with the third student, who preferred not to have our meetings recorded.

Each interview focused broadly on one aspect of Webb's (2000) model of college choice, but with flexibility in the questions to allow space for students to talk about whatever was most relevant to them and for me to add clarifying questions about information that students had shared in previous interviews. This was important in order for me to be able to gather students' feedback on the emerging narrative as we moved through the inquiry and college choice process together. Observations were unstructured

sessions in which students worked on part of their college application while I observed and asked occasional questions. During these observations I also provided support to students as requested, such as answering clarifying questions about parts of the application or serving as a thought partner while students developed their answers. Additionally, I kept a research journal throughout the inquiry to capture my reflections and emerging storylines for each student's college choice process. In remaining attentive to the narrative commonplaces, all collected data was dated and included descriptions to physically locate and contextualize the data in relation to place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Since students' experiences were the focus of my research, I did not formally collect data from any educators at the research site. However, I had many informal conversations with educators in order to help contextualize students' experiences, including a meeting with one of the school counselors who provided me with information about the high school's college counseling programs. I also used publicly available data on the high school's website and from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to better understand the high school context.

Data Analysis

Narrative inquiry focuses on the particular rather than generalizations, and the process of co-composing texts with participants is central to the analysis process (Clandinin, 2013). My analysis process was an iterative one in which I collected data, composed interim research texts, shared them with participants through our interview conversations, and collected their feedback on whether my understanding of events accurately captured their experiences. The interim research texts included timelines and

short narrative sketches of important events with attention to the three narrative commonplaces of temporality, sociality, and place. I used these interim texts to inform the questions I asked students in each interview, so that students could clarify additional details of events or correct my understanding of their experiences. I then incorporated their feedback into the interim texts as I continued to collect data, iteratively composing and refining the emerging narrative (see Figure 2 for a model of my data collection and analysis process). In narrative inquiry, this iterative process replaces other qualitative methods of early data analysis, such as coding.

Figure 2

Narrative Inquiry Data Collection and Analysis Process

Initial Data Collection   Data Analysis and Ongoing
                                                    Data Collection
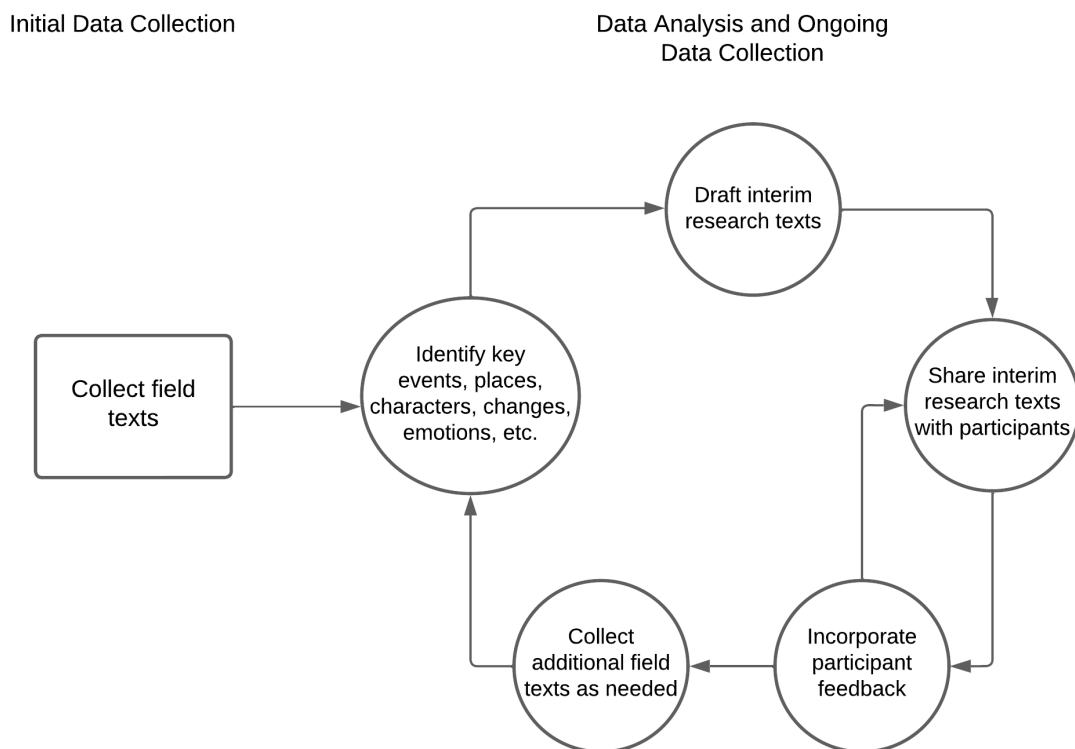
I then used the interim research texts to compose an overview of each student's narrative through a narrative sketch, which included "broad descriptions of scene and plot and a number of sub-sketches of key characters, spaces, and major events that figure in the narrative" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 11). Each student's larger narrative sketch was based on a chronology of the most salient events for them at each of the first four stages of Webb's (2000) model of college choice (deciding, exploring, selecting, and applying). As I moved from crafting interim research texts to the final research text, I also looked for places of resonance and themes (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) in individual students' stories at each stage of the college choice process and across the process as a whole. These resonances provided insight into how the experiences of college choice and disability intersected for each student. Using the techniques of "burrowing" and "restorying" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), I reconstructed events in the final research text from the perspective of participants, thinking about how events were connected to personal, social, and temporal aspects of experience and how the meaning of each experience related to the student's life stories. At the same time, I also made space within each text to acknowledge my role in the research story and to share my perspective as an educator and researcher in relation to my participants' experiences. In this way the research narratives are not simply a retelling of the participants' stories, but a collaborative narrative that reflects "the lives of both researcher and participant" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 12), accounting for multiple perspectives. Additionally, as I re-storied the narrative into the final research text, I tried to be mindful of the tensions of untold stories within each student's narrative.

I present the final research text as three chapters, each corresponding to the narrative of the first four phases of college choice for one participant. I have used a pseudonym for each of my participants in order to protect their identity. The final chapter of the dissertation, similar to a discussion chapter, highlights the resonances across participants' experiences with attention to making meaning of the inquiry experience within the larger social, cultural, and institutional narratives in which we live. This chapter will also include a personal reflection about my role in the inquiry and in students' experiences, and my own understanding of the process as a whole.

Narrative Quality

The typical criteria of validity and reliability as measures of quality assurance for research are less applicable to narrative inquiry, and narrative inquirers have to work carefully to define other measures of quality assurance that are in line with the methodology (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In my mind, the central question to ask when assessing the quality of the narrative research text as a researcher is whether the final narrative text is appropriately representative of the narrative that the participants and researcher have just lived. To this end, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest that the value of a narrative must be assessed as a whole using criteria such as plausibility, adequacy, verisimilitude, and the invitational quality of the narrative. Plausibility entails writing an account that seems feasible and realistic to the audience, creating a narrative that "rings true," while adequacy involves including enough attention to detail to allow the reader to imagine the story as it unfolds (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Verisimilitude is closely related to plausibility and adequacy, and emphasizes the "recognizability of the field in the research text" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 184). To these suggested

measures of quality, I would also add the criteria of responsibility, meaning that the final

narrative ethically and responsibly reflects the inquiry experience and upholds the

commitment that the researcher has made to participants. Together, these criteria create

an invitational quality to the narrative that allows readers to enter the story and

experience the phenomenon vicariously through the research text (Connelly & Clandinin,

1990). In order to meet these standards of narrative inquiry, I consistently collected

feedback on the developing narrative from participants to ensure that I was capturing

their experiences as accurately as possible. When moving to the final research text, I

wrote, read, and revised the text with additional details many times. I regularly consulted

my research journal, reviewed transcripts of conversations, and listened to the audio

recordings of conversations in order to ensure I was capturing the nuances of students'

experiences appropriately. In places where I felt tension between the final text and my

commitment to participants, I either revised the text as necessary or asked the participants

for permission to include more personal details.

Two risks of narrative inquiry that I have remained cognizant of throughout the

research process are intersubjectivity and smoothing (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

While I have tried to represent each student's story from their own perspective, each

story is told in the third person and includes places of my personal reflection in order to

distinguish between my own perspective and the perspectives of participants. Like any

research text, this narrative inquiry is shaped by the researcher (me) and is only a partial

view of the experience under study based on what I've chosen to include in the final text.

Moreover, the text is shaped by who I am as a researcher and educator, which is explored

in more depth in the "narrative beginnings" section of this chapter. My perspectives on

college choice, disability, and special education have inherently shaped the way that I have shared each student's story. I have also tried to account for narrative smoothing, or the tendency to force narrative coherence or a happy ending on a story (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narratives, and lived experiences, can be complicated and untidy, and are meant to be presented appropriately in field texts and research texts.

Limitations and Delimitations

As is common among qualitative methods of inquiry, the findings of this narrative inquiry focus on the experiences of a small number of participants and thus cannot be generalized to a larger population. Furthermore, narrative inquirers acknowledge that their interpretations of the inquiry are always tentative, in the sense that the interim and final research texts are a product of the choices that the researcher has made throughout the inquiry and that many alternative interpretations are possible (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) explain that experience "is always more than we can know and represent in a single statement, paragraph, or book. Every representation, therefore, no matter how faithful to that which it tries to depict, involves selective emphasis of our experience" (p. 39). Thus it is important for me to acknowledge that there were many additional details that each participant shared in our hours of conversation that are not included in the final research text but which may have shaped their college choice experience in undefined ways.

Additionally, the boundaries I have set around this study also limit the breadth of stories about college choice that are represented here. Since I wanted to gain a better understanding of the school context for the college choice process, all of my participants were current high school students, which excludes the perspectives of the many disabled

people who don't decide to pursue postsecondary education until after they have left high school. By recruiting student participants who aspire to two- or four-year postsecondary degree programs, my research leaves out disabled students who have decided not to pursue college or who are pursuing other postsecondary plans. Moreover, using a current IEP as a criterion for sampling excludes students who have exited the special education system by senior year but who nonetheless may have been shaped by the system in important ways. Finally, focusing on a single school site will mean that particularities of the school may influence the patterns that emerge in students' experiences, which I have tried to account for in my consideration of the narrative commonplace of "place." My research site was located in a predominantly white, middle-class town, and the student population from which I recruited participants reflected these demographics. This likely contributed to the lack of demographic diversity among my participants, which in turn has shaped this research text as a whole by excluding the voices of disabled students of color who are multiply marginalized in the school system.

Finally, due to the timeframe that I allotted for data collection, this research story only follows students through the first four stages of college choice according to Webb (deciding, exploring, selecting, and applying; 2000). The final stage of enrolling, which includes choosing an institution to attend and ultimately matriculating, is outside of the purview of this research and is not included in each student's story. Although two of my student participants had chosen institutions at which they planned to enroll in the fall after their senior year, I did not explore their choices in depth and have not included information about this final step of their choice process beyond the information that arose in our other conversations.

Narrative Beginnings

As mentioned previously, narrative inquiry begins with a researcher's own narrative about who they are in relation to the research puzzle and to participants; rather than attempting to remove personal experience from the research, "narrative inquirers bracket themselves in to an inquiry" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480).

My own stories of school, college choice, and disability began long before my interest in these topics emerged as an educator and as a researcher. I grew up in a middle-class family with two college-educated parents who began saving money for my college education as soon as I was born. School and academic achievement were always highly valued in our household, and I always lived and told a story of myself as a good student. When I struggled with academic subjects, I had the full support of my parents and often my older sister to help me overcome challenges and master whatever content I needed in order to maintain the story of myself as a good student. For the majority of my school career this story was confirmed for me by teachers and other professionals in my schools, and when I reached high school where academic tracking was used to sort students, I was always placed in the highest level academic courses. When it came time to apply to colleges, something that was always an assumed future for me, I received very little support from the college counseling office in my high school, despite attending what is considered a very good public school in the state of Massachusetts. I only met with my school counselor once, who provided me with what I considered then and now to be very poor and insubstantial advice, and was so discouraged by the experience that I never made an appointment to meet with her again. However, I received tremendous support from my family and teachers in navigating the college choice process, and they

reaffirmed for me the story that I was an excellent student who would go to an excellent college.

My stories and understanding of disability as a student were partial and vague, at best. As a result of academic tracking, disability and special education were mostly invisible in the high school spaces that I inhabited. I don't recall knowing a single person with a physical impairment beyond a short-term, sports-related injury, and the idea of learning disabilities was a concept that was never spoken about in the academic spaces where I learned. My only vague encounters with the idea of disability were through my best friend, who had been tracked into a lower academic pathway than my own and who would occasionally mention something about "sped" classes, although in retrospect, I don't know whether or not she was actually enrolled in any special education classes. In this way I knew that special education existed and that some students took classes under the umbrella of special education, but that experience was so far removed from my own that it might as well have been in a different school altogether. There was total physical separation of students labeled "high-achieving" and students labeled "disabled" in my high school experience. Despite this separation, I was at least distantly aware that there was a stigma associated with special education – that it was not a good thing to have to take special education classes and that such classes were places where not much learning took place. These stories of special education were deeply ingrained in my school experience, in part because of the vast differences between these stories and the stories of school that I lived.

My first real awakening to a narrative about disability and education began when I worked as a middle school English teacher in an inclusion classroom the year after I

graduated from college. In many ways I expected to continue living as a teacher the stories of school that I had lived as a student: that school was a valued place of learning, that students always worked hard and had fun learning, that teachers were important resources for learning and sources of support. While retrospectively I might call these expectations naïve, at the time these were the only stories I knew how to live in schools. However, these expectations quickly unraveled when I began living the story of a teacher. The school I taught in was a "turnaround" charter school, meaning that the administration and most of the staff were newly hired in the year that I was starting as an attempt to transform the school from one labeled as "failing" to one that would meet the District of Columbia's standards for a good school. My students, a number of whom were attempting the seventh grade for the second or third time, often worked hard, but many of them struggled to master content and skills. For most of my students, I would not imagine that they found learning to be fun. Additionally, I was not a very good teacher in my first year, and while I certainly improved in my second year of teaching, my experiences as a teacher changed the stories I knew of school as a place where I was always successful. My stories of my first two years as a teacher are as full of experiences of failure as they are of success, and these stories came to shape my understanding of schools as flawed institutions where students could have very different experiences from the stories I lived growing up.

My first two years of teaching also led me to begin to question the systems of academic tracking and labeling that are so common in schools, even as I used these systems to manage my own classroom. The ideas of leveled reading and the discourse around 'meeting the needs of all students' informed the way that we structured our

reading and writing curriculum, providing differential instruction to students based on their current reading levels as determined by standardized reading assessments. No matter how you designated them (group A, B, C; group red, green, blue; etc.), when students split off into leveled reading groups everyone in the classroom knew exactly which groups were the highest and lowest levels. As a teacher working with both students who received special education services and those who were designated for general education, I was also acutely aware of the formal labels that were imposed on students through these systems, as well as the more informal labels that students would use to disparage their peers who were part of the special education program. Students who did not receive special education services would often call their peers who did "slow," "crazy," or "stupid;" I remember having a long rant at one of my classes at one point for calling each other "retarded." However, this adolescent name calling was not so different from the formal labels assigned to these students through the special education system and used by teachers: emotionally disturbed, attention deficit disordered, learning disabled, and in one case mentally retarded, which was still a special education label used at the time. Even as I began to question the labels and systems in place to identify and categorize achievement and disability in the school, I also began to live and tell narratives about disability from the position of teacher that were negative and deficit-oriented, and which equated disability with challenge in education spaces. I didn't begin to reflect on these narratives and my complicity in perpetuating them until many years later.

Seven years after these first experiences as a classroom teacher, I spent two years working in highly selective undergraduate college admissions. Similar to my experiences as a high school student, students with disabilities were once again mostly invisible in the

space that I inhabited. When disability did become salient through a student's self-disclosure on an application or in a conversation, although this rarely happened, I felt both unprepared to have conversations about disability with my colleagues and unprepared to answer students' questions or address their concerns. As admissions officers we never stopped to reflect together about how our practices might create barriers for disabled students, other than acknowledging the fact that our office was literally inaccessible to anyone with a physical impairment (the steep steps). We also failed to consult with the people on campus who were most likely to help us think more critically about our practice; although our team met with various student service providers on campus once a year to share updates, the Disability Support Services office was not included in these meetings. In fact, I had been in my position for almost a year before a visiting parent asked me where the Disability Support Services office was, and at that point I had to look it up in order to direct her.

Within this context, there is one particular interaction around disability that stands out to me. As part of the admissions process, we would review application files and send a specified number to an admissions committee to make admissions decisions. I came across an applicant with a strong academic profile – she was salutatorian in her class – and a compelling essay about her experiences with dyslexia. I was surprised to notice a few typos in her essay, but I figured it was attributable to her dyslexia and it clearly hadn't impeded her academic success thus far, so I sent her on for my colleague to review with the recommendation that we send her through to the committee. I distinctly remember my colleague coming to the door of my office to question my choice, and although I've forgotten her exact words, the sentiment behind her comments was

incredulity – you know this essay has typos, right? Why would you send a student to a committee with typos in her essay? The message I received was clear: there is no place for dyslexia in college admissions, unless it has been polished and hidden out of sight. A student can say that they are dyslexic, but they cannot be dyslexic on their application or they are disqualified. I wish I could say that I did more to advocate for that student, but I didn't have a good response for my colleague. Ultimately, we did send the student to an admissions committee, where the student was waitlisted and later denied off the waitlist. I hope that she enrolled elsewhere at a school where the manifestations of impairment were not an automatic strike against her.

These experiences, along with a myriad of other experiences working with students at different levels, informed my current research puzzle. My story of disability and education thus far has been one mainly of ignorance and complicity with the social and cultural narratives of disability that are prominent in American society. However, over time I have come to know more students and people with various forms of impairment, leading me to question what it means to be labeled with a disability and to receive special education services, and how these experiences relate to the experience of applying for college, which is already an extremely complicated and stressful process for many students. I do not identify as a person with a disability, but I am a work in progress toward becoming a better ally to students who do identify as disabled. It is also important to acknowledge that I am a White woman with over a decade of experience working in the field of education, which makes it easy for me to move around in and blend into predominantly White education spaces. I grew up and attended high school in a town

similar to my research site, so Middletown High School felt familiar to me, and after I signed in at the front office each day no one questioned my presence there.

In living alongside students with disabilities as they navigated the college choice process, I became more aware of the ways that disability can manifest in school spaces and in students' stories about who they are and who they can be in school. I hope that other educators, students, and families will pause to reflect on the meaning of disability in education spaces as they read these stories, and to think about possible ways that we can redefine ability and disability in our schools.

Place

While the college choice process happens across the multiple contexts of students' lives, the school and community context of students' choice experience is especially influential. My participants all lived in a mid-sized town in the state of Massachusetts, which I will call "Middletown," and attended the local public high school, which I have dubbed "Middletown High School" or "MHS." According to census data, the population of Middletown is predominantly White (79%) and middle-class, with the median household income slightly above $120,000 and the poverty rate below five percent. Middletown high school enrolls just over 1,700 students, and the student population largely mirrors the town demographics with 75 percent of the student population identifying as White and 13 percent classified as low-income during the 2022-23 school year (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), n.d.). Nineteen percent of students at Middletown High are classified as students with disabilities (Massachusetts DESE, n.d.).

According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (n.d.), Middletown High has high graduation rates (96%) and the vast majority of graduates go on to attend postsecondary education after high school (80%). Among the population of students with disabilities, these rates are slightly lower; 80 percent graduate from high school in four years and about 63 percent attend college after high school. Among graduates who attend college, students with disabilities are slightly less likely than their nondisabled peers to attend private (46% compared to 51%) or public (43% compared to 45%) four-year universities, and are more likely to attend less selective public universities (30% compared to 6%). Students with disabilities are also more likely to attend community colleges (10.8%) when compared to their nondisabled peers (3.8%). However, the graduation rates and college enrollment of students with disabilities at Middletown High are better than the state averages; 78 percent of students with disabilities in Massachusetts graduate from high school in four years, and only 43 percent attend college after high school (Massachusetts DESE, n.d.).

Middletown High School offers a number of college and career readiness resources. Most of these resources are organized through the school counseling department, and the counselor to student ratio at MHS is 195:1. MHS offers a dual enrollment program which allows students to enroll at a local community college for free in their junior or senior year for course credit. Students have access to Naviance, which is an online college and career resource software and which facilitates students' college applications through the Common Application. MHS also offers a one-to-one laptop program, which allows students to take home a school laptop during the course of the

academic year in order to complete school work, and which students can use to complete college applications.

School counselors at Middletown High also teach a required seminar course for all students, with a different curriculum for each grade level. These seminars are held once every four days, replacing students' homeroom period, for one quarter of the academic year with each grade level getting one dedicated semester. Career exploration and postsecondary planning activities in this seminar begin in the last quarter of students' sophomore year. Sophomores use this seminar to work on resumes, conduct career information searches, and talk about how their course choices align with their postsecondary plans. In junior year, students take the seminar course during the third quarter, and use this time to prepare for standardized tests, begin to search for postsecondary options that match their career goals, learn about college application tools in Naviance, and become familiar with the Common Application. Students write an essay aligned to the Common Application prompts in their junior English class, and they are encouraged to ask one of their core academic teachers to write their future college recommendation prior to the end of the year. Students at MHS are also granted up to three excused absences in order to visit colleges in their junior or senior year. At the end of their junior year, students are strongly encouraged to set up a one-on-one postsecondary planning meeting with their school counselor.

Seniors take the guidance seminar course in their first quarter, and students are asked again to set up a one-on-one meeting with their counselor to discuss and prepare for their postsecondary plans. The counseling seminar course in senior year focuses on providing students with information and resources to facilitate their application, including

coaching them through how to use Naviance to apply. Students are often given time during this period to work on their applications as well. Seniors and juniors are also invited on several college tours organized by the school and to an information night about the FAFSA and financial aid in the fall of each academic year. Seniors have the opportunity to take a full-year capstone course that culminates in an internship to provide hands-on experience in a career field of interest.

Middletown High is home to several specialized programs for students who receive special education services. The high school houses an alternative education center for students with learning, behavioral, emotional, or psychiatric disabilities who have not been successful in traditional classrooms, as well as a dedicated space for a special education program that provides a combination of inclusion classes and separate classes for students with disabilities. The high school has a dedicated staff member who provides postsecondary transition support services for students who receive special education services, including a seminar course in the fall of senior year that focuses on college preparations. Only one of my participants received any of these specialized services, but all of these fell under the larger umbrella of special education programs offered at MHS.

The context of place is important in understanding the setting for the stories that follow. Each of my student participants had access to the many resources provided by their high school, resources which are not necessarily available in less affluent communities. They also attended a school in which special education services were offered through many avenues, including both inclusion and separate educational spaces. However, although they shared a similar school and community context, each student experienced special education and college choice in unique ways.

CHAPTER FOUR: ASHLEY

Meeting Ashley

Ashley was the first student participant to join my research project, and we met

six times over the course of the fall and winter, mostly in person. We met several times at

her high school in a private classroom, but we also met several times in a private study

room at the local public library when our designated room at the high school was

unavailable during the month of December. Our first meeting was at the beginning of

November in a room in the special education center at her high school. There was often a

lot of noise and activity in the center, but it was relatively quiet and calm when we closed

the door to our classroom to start our conversations.

Ashley was the oldest of three children in her family, so she was the first to

navigate the college application process. Both of Ashley's parents were educators who

worked in the school system in her town, and I had met her father during the research

consent process. From the very first time we met, Ashley knew that she wanted to pursue

a four-year college and that she wanted to commute to college, at least for the first year.

She had not yet started the application process at the beginning of November, which she

partially attributed to being busy because it was still the fall sports season. She was

planning to go home after our first meeting to come up with a list of colleges to which to

apply with her mom.

Ashley was focused on her target career – occupational therapist – throughout our

conversations. This focus was the guiding force that directed her application process, but

she had not chosen this career path until the summer before senior year, so her

exploration process had not been quite so focused. She felt that school work was often

difficult for her, but she was committed to the idea of college in order to achieve her career goals.

Our conversations spanned the course of five months, and during that time fall sports ended, Ashley started an internship, and holiday breaks came and went. At one point, Ashley was briefly on crutches due to a minor leg injury she sustained during regular, every-day activity. During the course of these five months, Ashley also started and completed her college applications, gained admission to her first choice school, and submitted her enrollment deposit. Reflecting on all that happened during this short period reminded me of how the college choice process happens in the midst of so many other events in students' lives. Ashley told me that making decisions about college felt like a big deal, but at the same time, the college choice process was only one part of Ashley's story of senior year.

School Experiences

Ashley described her high school experiences very positively. She felt that she had done really well in high school, despite the fact that she told me from the very beginning of our time together that "school is not my strong suit." Reflecting on her experiences, Ashley shared: "I've achieved so much and I've done so well, which I'm really happy about. And I've gotten like, the support has helped me throughout it, like the IEP and stuff."

She contrasted her high school academic experiences with her experiences in elementary and middle school, which had been really challenging for her. It took several years of testing for her to be diagnosed with ADHD in fifth grade and an auditory processing disorder in sixth grade. Ashley described the diagnosis process as a long

period of testing and trying out different accommodations in order to figure out which services would work best for her:

> It took a while for us to like, really figure out what I had, so I didn't get support 'til late, 'til fifth grade. So, like, a lot of like my middle school was a lot of, like, just getting supports and trying to like help me before I could, like, really do well in school.

In the meantime, Ashley found academic work, especially reading, to be challenging for her. "Everyone noticed that I was struggling," she told me, "and I wasn't doing, like I wasn't with the rest of my class. I was always behind."

Once she started receiving special education services, Ashley felt much more academically successful. "I found that school was a lot easier," she explained. "Not easy, but I was able to find ways to help, get help and get the work I need to get done without as much like struggle. I had people and other things that would help me." Some of the services Ashley received in middle school involved small-group instruction, which took place during the periods when other students took foreign language and elective courses. As a result, she never took a foreign language class and had one less elective class than her peers. However, she never felt any stigma around being pulled out of class to receive special education services. Instead, she felt like she had a community in her special education classes and that these classes made her enjoy learning more. "I was friends with the kids in there," she explained,

> So I actually had, like, I enjoyed it. So like, because it was just so, it like changed the way I like, liked learning and stuff, because it got easier once I was in. So like,

I never was like, "Oh, I wanna, I wish I was [in the general education classroom]," or something like that. It would always seem fine.

Ashley told me that she felt that taking tests had always been an obstacle for her, and in middle school she received testing accommodations such as small-group testing and extended time. She also received testing modifications as part of her accommodations in middle school, which made testing easier. From my own experience teaching students who received special education services, I knew that such modifications typically included things like providing fewer answer choices for multiple choice tests or breaking down writing prompts into smaller elements. Once she started high school, Ashley received the same tests as her peers, without modifications, and found it more difficult. At the same time, she acknowledged that some of her high school peers without IEPs also struggled with testing. When Ashley received pull-out services for testing, which she continued receiving in high school, she never felt uncomfortable about it. "I never really noticed that it, being like the only one leaving," she told me. "I feel like it was so normal for me to do that because it was like, so helpful."

Ashley felt that the special education services she received in middle school were critical for her academic success, and she felt that the services she was receiving at the high school level were also important for her. She was still receiving some special education services during her senior year of high school when we met, such as extended time and small group testing, but on much more of an as-needed basis than she had in previous years. While she was appreciative of the academic skills support course she had taken in previous years of high school, Ashley had elected not to take this course in her senior year. "I found it really helpful to like, get help and like break down assignments,"

she told me, but the course would have taken the place of another elective, so she decided to skip it for her final year. She felt that she had already learned most of the skills she needed, and she could just seek out extra help from a special education teacher if she felt that she needed it.

Despite feeling like her special education services provided her enough support to succeed, Ashley nonetheless felt that most of her academic classes in high school had been challenging for her. English was her hardest class due to the amount of reading and writing involved. Whenever she had to write an essay about a book, she told me, "that's probably what I struggle with most." Science and social studies were also challenging subjects for her, and she elected not to take science or social studies in her senior year because they were no longer required. Having great teachers might make these classes more enjoyable, but it didn't make her more interested in the material. "Like I've loved some of my teachers I've had for those classes… but not necessarily will I love what we're talking about," she told me. I asked her what her favorite teachers did to make some of her classes more enjoyable, and she shared:

> it's more like they just want to help you. Like they, like, like my teacher last year… he would give us assignments, but he would sit down and if we didn't understand, he would break it up and we would do small sections of it, and then check in after every section. And, and it was more, like, structured. So the more structure it is, the easier I have, the easier time I have. Like if it's super broad and I'm kind of doing [it] myself, like I don't know what to do. Like that's the things I struggle with."

Along with breaking down assignments and providing structure, her favorite teachers also made it easier for her to get help during class rather than needing to come after school for extra help. She emphasized to me that they were "structured, and they're super approachable and I can get help super easily."

Out of the core curriculum, math was probably Ashley's favorite subject. "I'm not like a math type of person," she told me, "But like, out of all my academic classes, I feel like it's the easiest and I'm able to do it really well." She was also really enjoying her capstone course, in which she worked on developing skills such as writing a resume and cover letter. The capstone course culminated in an internship, which Ashley was excited to start. In our first meeting, she described how she liked to do "hands on" kinds of things, and she was eager to start her internship working with an occupational therapist in a local middle school later in November.

Ashley felt like her senior year course load was appropriate for her, and she was confident in her choice of curriculum. "I'm taking an English class and a regular math class," she said,

> but I've never taken like an honors or an AP [Advanced Placement] in any
> subject, just because it's so challenging. But I feel that like, all the regular classes
> I've taken, like, have been good for me. Like I wouldn't want to push myself to do
> anything higher.

Prior to starting her senior year internship, Ashley's favorite part of school was working with an alternative education program for students who had been classified with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, or multiple disabilities, which I will call "Connections." Every time she talked about her work with Connections, Ashely's

eyes lit up. She described the program as being for "the kids with really higher special needs that need separate spaces." She started working with Connections in her junior year when she began going to gym class with the Connections students in order to help out. In her senior year, she expanded her work with the program. "I'm still doing the gym and I'm also in their class one period," she explained,

> So I do different activities, like I will sit with them and do their work, read an article or just, we do like art projects together, make like, they have a coffee shop thing. So we'll like clean the pots and like teach them, find different recipes for like, baked treats and stuff like that. And then I'll often go, like when I have a free block, I often go and hang out with them and just help.

It was clear from her descriptions of her work with the Connections program that it was an important aspect of her high school experience and that she really enjoyed it.

Outside of the classroom, one of Ashley's favorite parts about high school was playing field hockey. She had close relationships with other members of the team and considered them an important part of her social circle at school. Ashley had also spent time outside of school working with an autistic student as a care provider, and had done volunteer work with the disabled community through clubs at school. She considered these activities to be an important part of who she was and who she was becoming as she approached the college process.

Deciding

Ashley had known for a long time that she would go to college; she couldn't recall a particular moment of deciding to go to college, but since she had been interested in nursing or special education as potential career fields for many years, she knew that

attending a four-year college would be necessary. "There was never like a moment where I'm like, you know what, I definitely am going to college," she explained. "I've always kind of known that I want to go to school and like, graduate with a degree in something." Both of Ashley's parents had gone to college and worked in education, and I wondered if this was also a reason that college seemed like a natural next step for her. Working in the field of special education was also a part of her family history. She told me that her grandfather had worked in special education, and that while her mother wasn't currently working as a special educator, she had worked in special education classrooms in the past.

College wasn't a topic that Ashley remembered hearing about much in middle school, but in high school it was definitely a common subject. Despite the amount of conversation about college, she didn't feel like her parents or teachers necessarily expected her to attend college, nor did she feel pressure from her social network to go to college. "I don't think there's ever like, 'oh, you're gonna go to college,' or 'you have to go to college,'" she recalled, "but I think there was more of like, I think it more comes from me knowing that I want to do college."

However, she didn't put a lot of time into thinking about college until her senior year. It wasn't until the summer before senior year that she decided she was interested in becoming an occupational therapist as a career. "I knew I wanted to do something with nursing and special needs, like special education," Ashley told me, "like I always had some type of nursing in my head, but I didn't like, I didn't really know what it would be." Ashley's mom played an important role in her career deliberations. One of Ashley's

cousins was working on a Master's degree in occupational therapy, and Ashley's mom

suggested that occupational therapy might be a good career path for her as well:

> She was like, "that's something you probably would love," because I've worked
>
> with a lot, I'm super close with a couple of special, like special needs kids outside
>
> of school. And so they're always like, and I've worked so well with them. They're
>
> like, you need to do something with them. And so I'm not 100 percent sure how
>
> occupational therapy came up. But I remember talking to my mom one day and
>
> she was like, "no, this would be great for you, like it gives you what you want in
>
> so many settings you could be in."

Her mom's suggestion that occupational therapy was a field that had numerous career

options was also attractive to Ashley. "It gives me so many more opportunities than just

being like a special ed teacher or paraprofessional," she explained.

> So, like I'm able to work in a hospital setting, which is kind of what I wanted to
>
> do. Or I could be in my own, like office, or within like a doctor's office or a
>
> school system, which I'm now leaning towards.
>
> Her mom encouraged her to talk to her cousin over the summer about her

occupational therapy program, so Ashley talked to her cousin and found out more about

the material her cousin was learning and the type of work she was doing in the laboratory

portions of her classes. These conversations solidified her interest in occupational

therapy. Despite learning more about this career field from her cousin, Ashley wasn't

sure how much science was involved in getting an occupational therapy degree when I

first asked her about it. However, she wasn't worried about it. She explained to me that

her struggles with science were more in the topics of "nature, and like molecules," but

that "if it's more like hands on, like about people," that type of science was more interesting for her. At the time I wondered if it would matter in the admissions process that Ashley had elected not to take science in her final year of high school.

After setting occupational therapy as a career goal, Ashley decided that she wanted to attend a school that had a five-year occupational therapy degree program. Her cousin's experience going back to school for a Master's and her own experiences in school motivated her to try to minimize the amount of time she would have to spend in postsecondary education in order to get her degree. The desire to move through a degree program quickly motivated Ashley to focus in on a single career path. "Being able to get it done within a certain amount of time, it's like, kind of pushed me to like think about really what I want to do," she told me. It struck me that her career focus was a major force in her college process, and it was strongly motivated by her feelings about school as a place where she wanted to spend as little time as possible. However, she made these career decisions after she had begun exploring college options, so the decision to pursue a five-year occupational therapy program significantly changed her exploration and selection process between junior and senior year.

When I asked Ashley if she had any other fields she was interested in exploring in college, she told me, "I really right now have my mind set on occupational therapy." She was hoping that her internship would give her more insight into this field, but it was really the only thing she was considering. Her mom was also encouraging her to look into special education, but she wasn't interested in teaching, so she hadn't put much thought into it as an option.

Although Ashley always seemed confident in her decision to pursue college, she did feel that it was a big decision. When we first met, she felt a little nervous about the college process and making decisions on her own. She told me:

It's crazy to think that like, this is my last year of high school and I'm going to be graduating. So like, it's hard for me to believe that sometimes, like I'm submitting [applications] and I have to make a big decision next.

Exploring

Despite admitting to me that she didn't give the college process much thought until the fall of her senior year of high school, Ashley actually did quite a bit of college exploration in her junior year and the summer prior to senior year – primarily through going on college tours. When I first met with Ashley, she had gone on at least five college tours, mostly with her mom or with one of her close friends. Most of the tours she went on were from a list her guidance counselor had given her at the end of her junior year, based on her initial career interests in nursing and special education.

Ashley's experiences with college tours were largely directed by others. Her first visit to a college was around Thanksgiving time of her junior year of high school, when Ashley accompanied her cousin on a college visit to a private, urban university. She wasn't really interested in this school and had no intention of applying, but she went along because her cousin wanted to see it: "like it was just kind of like, oh yeah, sure. I'll go with you." Upon seeing this university, Ashley knew right away that it wasn't the right school for her. She didn't like how crowded it felt walking around the area of the city where this university was, which was "literally like a city block." Her cousin also got his directions mixed up, so they didn't entirely do the visit they had planned. We laughed

as she explained to me, "Granted, we didn't do an actual tour. We got stuck at another college somehow." Although she didn't plan to apply to this school, it did make her think about the college process, if only in the sense that she definitively ruled this college out from her pool of potential schools.

Later, in the spring of her junior year, she went on several college tours with her mom, her close friend, and her friend's mom. These visits were organized by the moms, who chose the schools to visit based on whether they thought that Ashley and her friend might like them. I asked if it was because the colleges were close to them, but Ashley explained that "it wasn't like, oh, it's close up, let's look. It was more like, oh, it wouldn't be a bad college." Ashley found it helpful to go on campus tours with her close friend, because it helped her to be able to talk about the schools with someone who knew her really well. "[What] I found really helpful is to like bounce off ideas from like, someone who's, I've been close with since I was super young and knows me really well," she explained.

> So like, if I would say something, she'd be like, 'but do you really like that or do, is that something you really don't like? Are you just saying that?' So like, it's good to be able to like talk about it, and like, compare like what we paid more attention to and stuff.

In the spring of junior year, Ashley also started attending the guidance seminar course provided by her school, which replaced her homeroom once or twice a week during the third academic quarter. During this class period, a counselor at her school began introducing aspects of the college application process, such as when to ask teachers for recommendation letters and what topics were covered in the essay prompts for the

Common Application. She also wrote her essay in her junior English class, which she eventually submitted almost unchanged in her Common Application.

Although she had taken these early exploration steps in her junior year of high school, Ashley didn't really begin to explore her college options seriously until the summer before senior year. "There was never a time I was like, oh, I really need to start thinking about it," she told me. "Like over the summer, then I started to kind of be like, oh, I have to figure out which ones I would like and what kind of are my options." Much of this change in attitude was prompted by a meeting that Ashley and her father had with her school counselor at the end of junior year. Ashley assumed most students had this type of meeting with their counselor, and she explained that in the meeting, her father and her counselor "were kinda like, we probably should start looking at colleges that you really want to think about and that have things for you." Her counselor asked her if she had a major in mind, which at the time was nursing or special education, and what type of school she wanted to attend in terms of size and location. Based on these criteria, her counselor provided some suggestions of schools that might be a good fit for Ashley, which then directed many of her college visits over the summer.

Once senior year began, Ashley started thinking about college more seriously – although she still didn't feel any rush to apply. "I'm someone who just kind of like, I was like, 'oh, it's so far away,' when it really wasn't," she explained to me.

But like I did a lot like, like, I did tours and visiting the college. Like looking online at things and like talking to a couple of people I knew who went to college around here, kind of like their, what they liked about them and that kind of stuff.

I asked Ashley if her school had offered any college fairs or college tours, but she wasn't completely sure. She knew there was one college fair at a nearby school that her high school had promoted, but she hadn't gone to it. "It was this fall and like, at that point, I was like, I know kind of an idea of like where I want to go and that kind of stuff," she told me.

> And I was like I don't, like to me that stuff is kind of overwhelming because there's so much going on, so many people and like, so it doesn't, it usually makes things worse. So I didn't, I didn't think it was gonna be very helpful.

Her comments made me reflect on my own experiences working at college fairs as an admissions officer – college fairs were loud, crowded, and hectic. I could imagine that for Ashley, who felt like listening was sometimes a challenge for her, college fairs would not be a productive way to learn about schools. Ashley also noted that her school offered a couple of college trips in her senior year, but she wasn't interested in the schools that they visited. The one she could remember clearly was a community college, and since she knew she wanted to major in occupational therapy, she was only interested in four-year schools.

Ashley's college exploration process was heavily influenced by important adults in her life, especially her mom, who organized college tours for her, and her school counselor, who created her initial shortlist. However, at the point in her process when she first met with her guidance counselor, Ashley had not yet decided on occupational therapy as a career goal. As a result, the list of schools that her guidance counselor provided was based on her initial interests in nursing and special education, and so most of the schools that Ashley visited over the summer prior to her senior year did not have

occupational therapy programs and did not end up on her shortlist for application. This ultimately created a disconnect between her exploration process and her selection process, since she described touring schools as her major avenue of exploration:

> For me, more of it was kind of getting a feel for the school. Like the information online, like it was a little bit helpful to me, but it was more like I want to be able to like, get more information from the school, not just from like the website.

After she had started applying, I asked Ashley if she was going to try to visit the other schools on her shortlist before submitting her applications. At that point she figured she would probably wait to visit until after she was admitted, because she was so focused on just getting all of her applications done.

Selecting

When creating her application shortlist, the number one most important criterion for Ashley was that a school must have an occupational therapy program, since that was her target career. Her second most important criterion was that the school had to be within driving distance to her home, as she was planning to commute to school when she first enrolled.

This was a change, she said, from when she was younger. She gave the example of a local state university, saying,

> younger me, I was like, "oh, I don't want to go to like [university name] or somewhere like that because I'm so close." But like, I don't care how close I am anymore because I know I want to spend at least my first year at home.

This change was prompted in large part by the death of her uncle at the end of the summer before senior year; she had previously considered commuting, but it wasn't until the beginning of senior year that she decided definitively to do so. She explained to me:

> So I am not, like I get super homesick. So I, and I've gone, so like my grandfather passed away and I was super close with him. It was expected, he had Alzheimer's, but, when I was in seventh grade, so that really played an effect on me. And then at the end of the summer, my uncle who I was super close with passed away suddenly. So it has played a huge part in me. So I, I always had a thought about maybe commuting to college. And I like, I've made my decision. And my, my parents knew that, like they kind of had a feeling this, and they completely agree. They knew that I wouldn't, I wouldn't do well and be myself if, if I was somewhere far away, or lived in a dorm with someone I wasn't close with. And so I think I made my decision that I'm going to commute, which is played a big part of finding colleges. So I want to make sure I'm, like it's drivable distance for me to commute because I, for at least the first year or first semester, so I, when I'm getting used to doing all the work and the classes and the school, I'm able to be home and have people like my family around me.

This history of loss had a strong impact on Ashley, and it seemed that the sudden loss of her uncle had solidified in her mind that she wanted to be closer to family. She figured about an hour and 15 minutes was her maximum driving distance: "so it's not like, I'm not traveling crazy distances where I'm going to be exhausting myself just driving and getting home late, leaving early, that kind of thing."

Other things that Ashley considered when making her application shortlist were whether she had heard people talking about a school before, whether she knew someone who had gone to a school, whether the school provided disability services, and the acceptance rate at a school. When I asked her if there was an acceptance rate threshold for her that would dissuade her from applying, she told me that,

> it was not really that I had like a number that I was like, oh, if it's below that, then I don't want to, it's not worth looking at. There was never really a number, but if I saw it and it was like, weird to me or something, then I wouldn't. And in like one spot, I'm pretty sure it was on Naviance, there was a little view of like your, where your GPA was or something and around where you're accepted, or something like that that I would look at, that was very helpful.

The scatterplot in Naviance that Ashley referred to showed the distribution of grades and standardized test scores for prior applicants to each college from her high school, and whether those applicants were admitted to a particular college. It seemed like this information gave Ashley a better idea of what schools she should consider. Ashley also didn't want a school that was too big or too urban, and she wanted to go somewhere that felt like it had a good sense of community.

When I asked Ashley to tell me more about what she was looking for in terms of disability supports at the college level, she hadn't thought about any particular supports – just that a school had to have support available. She posited that it could be a learning center or something else "that helps students with IEPs, like, get what they need." Her past challenges with school made this especially important to her. "I always knew that I want, I wanted to try to make sure that they had that," she explained, "just so I, I wouldn't

end up struggling like I had in the past." It was also important that disability services be easily accessible so that, whether or not she decided to pursue accommodations through the Disability Services Office, she wouldn't have to "hunt it down." Ashley thought there was maybe only one college that she had removed from her shortlist because she was unsure if they had disability services when she visited. For the most part, she found that the schools she toured had at least some disability services, although she did not end up applying to almost all of these schools because they didn't have her target major.

I noticed that when Ashley talked about disability services in our early meetings, she sometimes described them as "IEP services," and I wondered if it was because that was the language with which she was familiar, or if she was aware that her IEP technically wouldn't transition with her to college.

In terms of campus community, Ashley wanted to feel like there was a place where commuter students could fit in. "I want to be able to have like a community," she explained,

> so like when I'm not in a class at the minute or in between classes, I'm able to go
> somewhere, sit, hang out with other people, get work done, and like feel
> comfortable within like the school and have a place to go.

It was important to her that there be options for her to engage in extracurricular activities as a commuter student and that there be a physical location, like a student center, where she could go to be with other students when she wasn't in class. She wanted a bustling campus environment, even though she would not be a residential student. She provided the example of one of the tours she went on to a nearby state school where the campus seemed dead. "I went and I didn't see a single person there. It was Saturday morning. We

might have saw one or two people, but it was like, I was like, where's everybody?" When I asked her whether it would be hard to get a feel for the campus community at the schools she hadn't visited, which was most of her shortlist, she told me that she had tried to get a sense of the campus community at some schools by talking to current or former students about their experiences.

Ashley didn't care much about the name recognition or prestige of a school. "I'm not a person who cares, like other people's thoughts on the school," she told me. "Like, I don't care if people think, 'oh, that's kind of a weird school to go to,' or I don't really care about the big name schools, like that's not like on my list." She said she wasn't putting one of the larger state universities on her list because she thought of it mostly as a party school where tons of her classmates would go, and that wasn't attractive to her. I asked her if it was important to her where her friends went to school, but she said that most of her friends had very different ideas about what they wanted for a college, so it didn't really make much of a difference to her process. Her close friend, with whom she went on the college tours, was really the only friend with whom she talked about college.

Once she determined what she was looking for in a school, Ashley used Naviance, which she learned how to use in her senior guidance seminar class, as a search tool to search for schools by her desired criteria. This was how she eventually came up with her initial shortlist of schools for application. Since there were not too many schools that had occupational therapy as a major, and even fewer that offered a five-year program, Ashley did not have an extensive shortlist. She planned to apply to five schools: three less-selective in-state public universities, one of which was almost open admissions, and two small private colleges, one selective and one less-selective. All of the schools on

her initial shortlist accepted at least 70 percent of applicants. A few of the schools she ended up applying to did not have her exact major, but offered special education or health sciences that were closely enough related to occupational therapy that she included them on her list.

Her final list was also influenced by the input of several educators at her school and in the community. One of Ashley's sports coaches had attended a school on her shortlist, and she had encouraged Ashley to apply. Ashley also received advice from one of the classroom aids in the Connections program where she volunteered, who had attended a different school on her shortlist. "She went there and loved it and was like, you would really like it," Ashley told me, "cause she knows me pretty well and was like… 'I can see you there, like you would fit in really well.'" She also decided to add an out-of-state school to her shortlist after she had initially begun the application process, because her close friend was applying there and because the occupational therapist whom she shadowed for her internship was attending this school for her Master's degree. Not only did this occupational therapist encourage Ashley to apply, she also offered to act as a resource for Ashely:

> She was telling me, like, I could come and shadow her one day in the spring and I could go and meet her professors and go into the classes with her… And she was like, 'oh, here's my phone number.' So that was super, super helpful.

Ashley found it helpful to hear about the schools she was considering from trusted adults, because she felt like they provided her with a more realistic perspective on the school than what she was receiving during official campus tours, which tended to only showcase positive aspects of a school. She explained,

I think a lot of it was like I knew someone who was like, like, would really tell me like straight up like how this school was actually and how they liked it. And like, and if there was parts that they wouldn't like, they would tell me anyways.

Ashley had a clear first choice school going into the application process: a small, less-selective public university about an hour away from her home. This school was initially suggested to her by her counselor and her parents, but once she visited and learned that it offered a five-year occupational therapy degree program, it quickly became her top choice:

Once I really like looked at it and figured out it had this five year program, like that really like changed my mind being like, that's really where I want to go. And after visiting, it helped me a lot because that was really the first college I was like, "I see myself here," and I like the campus and like – so, like, honestly, like the other ones I visited I never was like, 'oh my gosh, like, this is for me.' Like there'd be like, oh yeah, I like that or I like – but there was never a time where I was like, oh I really, like, this is somewhere I want to go.

I asked her to tell me a little more about her tour of this school. Ashley told me that it was a small information session, but then the tour of the campus was extensive. I asked her if the tour guide had pointed out the Disability Services Office on campus, since continuing to receive disability support services was important to her, and she told me that, yes, it was part of the tour. The only downside of the tour was that she visited in August, so there weren't as many students around as she would have liked. "There was a student tour guide," she explained, "which I met, but it was a grad student. So he was in his 30s, I think, which kind of, it was like, I would have liked to meet, like, someone like going to

school at the moment." Despite this, she had loved the campus and felt like the school had a good sense of community, with good spaces designed for commuter students. "There's a ton of commuters, and there's a place for everyone to go when they're not doing a class. Like they have a good like community kind of area where I can go whenever I want," she explained. "And it wasn't too far of a drive. So I really liked that. And it was a pretty campus."

Although Ashley began the application process with a choice set in mind, her selection process continued while she was submitting applications. It wasn't until after she had started the common application that she removed one local state school from her list, which she had initially included because her counselor and her mom both told her to keep it on her list as a backup plan. However, this school didn't have occupational therapy or special education as available academic majors, and she ultimately decided not to apply because it wouldn't provide her with the credential she needed. As she was filling out the application, she thought,

> I don't know why I'm picking a school that I don't have anywhere that like, I don't have like a program I want to go into. Like why am I applying there? So like when I was thinking about it, I was like, I know I'm not going here, like it doesn't make sense for me to like put in all this effort to the application.

As mentioned previously, she also added in an out-of-state school that the occupational therapist at her internship was attending as a graduate student.

Although Ashley knew for a long time that she was planning to go to college, she never really felt a strong pull toward a particular school prior to her exploration over the summer before senior year. "I didn't really ever think about like, oh, I really want to go to

this college. Like, that sticks out to me." She felt that this was different from many of her peers. "I know people who've been thinking about it for years and being like, 'Oh, this is where I'm gonna go,' and this has never been me." As a result, her selection process was based primarily on the list she generated from Naviance and the input she received from important adults and friends.

Applying

Similarly to how she understood her college exploration process, Ashley thought that she was beginning the application process later than she actually began it. When we first met in November, Ashley told me that she hadn't really started her applications, but she had already taken some of the essential first steps. Ashley took the SAT, completed a serious draft of her college essay, and had asked her junior year English teacher to write her college recommendation, all before the end of her junior year of high school. Additionally, prior to beginning the Common Application in November, she had been introduced to topics and resources related to the application process in her senior guidance seminar course, which took place in the first academic semester of senior year.

Ashley described her school counselor and the senior guidance seminar as being crucial to her success in the application process. Her counselor's role was especially important, because she was the oldest of her siblings and thus the first to go through the college process. "I feel like my guidance counselor really helped me and, like, was good to, like, bounce schools off of and had ideas for me and that kind of stuff," she explained. Her counselor also covered a wide range of topics in the senior seminar, including how to request a transcript, how frequently to communicate with teachers about requested

recommendations, and when to schedule a meeting with him prior to application deadlines.

One thing that Ashley found especially helpful about guidance seminar was that her counselor gave her and her classmates a list of answers to some of the Common Application questions about Middletown High School, such as class size and the type of GPA that MHS used (weighted versus unweighted). She told me,

> even for like the personal questions they would tell you like… if it was like weirdly worded, they would like reword it and tell you exactly what you need to put in. Or like for some of the things, or like where to find your GPA, like it would tell you where to find it.

Ashley said these were all questions that she wouldn't have known how to answer otherwise, and receiving this application answer sheet was probably the most helpful thing about guidance seminar.

Furthermore, her guidance seminar course provided direct instruction on how to navigate Naviance and the Common Application, and prompted her to start and move forward with the application process. "I literally learned all the information I needed to like complete the Common App and complete [Naviance], like all of that type of stuff," she described.

> Like I would not have known how to do it unless, like, they had it. I also wouldn't have thought about like, my, really my deadlines… I don't know if I would have ever had like a time where I'd been like, "alright, I actually need to start this." Like there was at one point, they're like asking for deadlines and I had never looked at, like I had never even thought about it.

Since Ashley wasn't planning to submit her applications for any of the earliest deadlines, she felt that she didn't need to start her applications right away. It wasn't until she looked up her application deadlines in November that she realized she should get started. She described her surprise when her counselor asked her to write down her first application deadline for her teacher recommendation. "I was like, what? Like what?" she told me.

> So I had to like go up and like Google like when. And I like put in some random deadline in like February or something. And I came home and I was like, oh yeah… I need to like actually get started. Like there's definitely, like that's probably the last deadline.

This suddenly created a greater sense of urgency for her, and prompted her to finally begin her Common Application.

Her counselor also gave them time during class to work independently on their applications. Ashley said that the majority of the time, they would have at least the last 20 minutes of the 45 minute period to work on applications, with their counselor available to answer questions for them. However, Ashley felt that she wasn't generally productive in working on her application during the seminar class – it was early in the morning, so she was tired, and it was one of the only periods that she got to see some of her friends during school, so she preferred to socialize with them. She also couldn't motivate herself to start the application during school. "I feel like it was like a drag for me to like actually start," she admitted. "Like there were sometimes they would tell us to work on it during guidance sem[inar], and I just wouldn't because I was like, I don't really want to." This lack of motivation was in part due to feeling like college was only a distant reality. "It

never really felt like, oh my gosh, like I'm actually going to college… So a lot of it was

like, oh, I have plenty of time, like I don't need to worry about it, like I'm fine."

As a result, Ashley completed the majority of the Common Application at home

after starting it at the beginning of November. She described to me how it was difficult to

find time to work on it until after the fall sports season was over. She had her free period

at the end of the day, so occasionally she could go home and work on college planning

before practice, though she rarely did. If she stayed at school during her free period, she

mostly spent the time volunteering with the Connections program. "Like I'll go into like

one of the other classrooms and, like, help out," she explained.

Once she began filling in the Common Application, she completed it fairly

quickly. "I think the biggest thing was I just like, I was kind of like not thinking about it

for the longest time," she explained, "and then all of a sudden, I just had to, like, work on

it quickly and get a lot of it done."

First Steps: Standardized Testing and Recommendations

Like most of her college-bound peers, Ashley began the application process by

taking the SAT college admissions test, months before she ever looked at the Common

Application.

Ashley described herself as someone who doesn't do well on tests, and while she

took the SAT in her junior year, she didn't put much effort into it. "Tests don't show how

much work I put in," she explained, "because of I'm on, because of my IEP it like … I've

never done well with tests, and they're, they make me super anxious." She had taken the

PSAT in her sophomore year, primarily because her school signed her up to take it and it

was free to do so. I asked her if everybody in school took the PSAT, and she told me

"You can opt out of it, but it's more work to opt out than just to like go and take it." She didn't pay much mind to her PSAT scores, since she felt like the point of the PSAT was just to understand how the test was structured.

When it came time to take the SAT in junior year, she didn't spend much time on preparation. Ashley did not intend to submit any of her SAT scores, but took the test just so that she would have the option to submit scores if she needed to at some point. This was consistent with the advice she was receiving from her parents, her guidance counselor, and her special education teacher. She and her close friend received similar advice:

> our parents were more like, "you guys should take it just to have. Like, you never know if one of the colleges will need it, like you don't want to not take it and end up, ending up needing it at the end." So that was kind of like, okay, whatever, I'll just do it. That was really the, like, only thing that convinced me to do it, was like, that. It was like, and my guidance counselor mentioned the same to me, and same to my special ed teacher, she, they were all like, well you should take it just to have, like, it doesn't matter the score but you have, like you have it if you need it.

Although she didn't really want to do anything to prepare for the SAT, her mom bought her an SAT prep book and encouraged her to study. Her grandmother, who ended up living with Ashley's family for a few months around the time that Ashley planned to take the SAT, also encouraged her to prepare for the test. During this same period, Ashley got COVID-19 and had to stay home from school for several days, so she ended up studying a little bit, just to appease her mom and her grandmother. "I probably studied

for a maximum of like two hours for it. So like, I really didn't do much because I'm not a big studier either," she explained.

> Like it just makes me more frustrated, like looking at things and doing it over and over again. So like I really didn't do much studying for it. It was more kind of like pressure, oh, you need to do a little bit of this."

Ashley applied for accommodations on the SAT, and she felt that the process was pretty smooth for her. "It was actually pretty easy. I just sent, I filled out a form and I sent it to one of the special ed teachers here, and they sent it and that was really all I needed to do," she told me. Ashley received extended time on her SAT, was able to take the test in a small group setting, and received frequent breaks. Her description of her experience contrasted sharply with my expectations about requesting accommodations, having read so many horror stories about students' difficulty with accessing accommodations on the SAT.

She took the SAT at her high school on a weekend in the winter of her junior year. She described her testing experience as overwhelming, but not terrible, largely because she didn't put too much pressure on herself.

> Like I was like, I don't care the score I get, it doesn't matter to me. So I feel like it wasn't bad because I didn't put that pressure on myself. I feel like if I did put more pressure, it would have been worse, because I would have been more anxious and stressed over it. But I went in thinking like, it doesn't matter the score I get as long as I just take this. So I, during it was hard, but it was just, I just like, I always thought like, it's fine. Like it doesn't matter.

While she didn't put too much pressure on herself going into the test, actually taking the test was difficult. "It was overwhelming, a lot, and I was like I don't know how to do half these things because I like look, just looked at them." Ashley said that it also didn't help that she arrived for the test at 7:30 in the morning and didn't finish until after 2:00 in the afternoon – six and a half hours later. During all that time, it was hard to stay focused on the test:

> It was like the, in it, in the same room, the same seat… I got frequent breaks and like, so did the class, so like, it was good to be able to get up, like put my things down. Like, I'm not looking at this, and just like move around for a while. But it was still like a lot… probably like the last hour I was like, I don't care what, like I'm doing this but I don't, like I'm not putting too much thought into my answers because it's so much time.

> When Ashley received her score, she felt proud that she had even taken the test and had done as well as she had. "I was proud of myself for that," she told me,

> and my parents were, too. They completely agreed with me, like, they're like, this is great. Like this isn't, like you're not a test-taking person, like you're not a person who's going to get like way high on these kinds of things. So like, as long as I did it, and was proud of myself for doing it, like they agreed with me.

She had no intention of re-taking the test, especially since she didn't plan to submit her test scores to any of the schools to which she was applying. She explained,

> like I have it and I'll gladly give it to any school, but if I don't have to, like, I don't want to. Because I don't want that score affecting me knowing that I can, like, it doesn't show how much work I actually put in.

Ashley also took steps to secure her college recommendation letters before she formally began the application process. As part of her junior year guidance seminar, Ashley was instructed to ask one of her academic teachers to write a recommendation letter, and she chose her junior year English teacher because she thought he was going to teach her again in senior year. When she and her father met with her counselor at the end of her junior year, the two of them helped her to draft the email to her teacher to ask for the recommendation, and then told her to follow up with him during class. Although this teacher didn't end up teaching her again in senior year, Ashley felt like he had been a good choice as a recommender. "He knew me well, and I knew him well, which was helpful," she explained. "And he still, like it's actually the, like, internship class [that he was supposed to teach]. So like, he still kind of like does some things with us." She didn't ask him to write about anything specific, but he had sent her a google form with some questions to fill out in order to help him write the recommendation.

In December, when she going through Naviance to check some of her application deadlines, Ashley noticed that her teacher recommendation was not showing as submitted. She said she would need to follow up with her teacher, because at that point it was only a week before her first application deadline. At the same time, she wasn't sure if everything in Naviance was necessarily up-to-date. She made a note on her phone to check-in with her counselor the next day at school in order to make sure everything she needed was submitted on time.

Similarly, Ashley filled out some information about herself on Naviance for her counselor to use in writing her letter of recommendation. She said they also met together one-on-one to talk about her responses, which was helpful because initially she wasn't

sure what to include in the form. When they talked about it, she was able to add in more information in response to her counselor's questions.

Completing the Common Application

When Ashley began the process of filling out the Common Application, she had already completed her essay, which she had written during her junior-year English class. She felt fortunate that she taken the assignment seriously and had completed it prior to starting the other pieces of the application. "If I had, didn't do it last year, I feel like that probably would have been the hardest part," she explained.

> Because I wouldn't have had, like last year I had the structure of here, it's getting graded. It's, I have this rubric. Like I have to, like I want to do good on the rubric. But so, like having that structure made me really, like having a deadline and all this like helped me a lot, because I had teachers look at it and they made comments and edited. And like this year if I did it now, like one, I wouldn't have had any motivation to do it because I wouldn't have any help along the way. So like, I feel like being able to do it last year, I looked at it this year and I really made very, very few edits.

Since Ashley was not fond of writing, she knew that she wouldn't want to do the essay again, so she put a lot of effort into it during her English class. "I knew myself that I wouldn't want to redo it and I wouldn't want to have to write an extra essay," she told me, "like if I don't have to write an essay, if I, if there's a way I can get out of that, I will. So that definitely shaped me, like, writing last year." Her teachers also reinforced this idea by encouraging her to write a strong essay so that she wouldn't have to write it again.

Having this assignment built into the curriculum was really important for Ashley, and made a big difference in her college application process. Knowing that she would be graded on her essay was a huge motivating factor for her. "I think that was probably the biggest thing was like oh, I want to do good," she explained.

And knowing it was going to college was another big factor, but like, at that time, I wasn't thinking about that. I was just thinking about oh, I'm almost done with junior English, like, I just want to do this last assignment.

When I asked Ashley what she had written about in her essay, she described writing about her relationship with her grandparents, especially her close relationship with her grandfather, who had passed away from Alzheimer's when she was younger. "Like I've talked about, like, a lot over a period of time, like, with him, and like things I did with him," she told me. Since she later told me that her experience with her grandfather and his illness was one of the factors that motivated her to consider special education, I wondered if that had also been part of her essay. While she wasn't totally sure which essay prompt she had chosen to answer for her junior year class, it didn't take her too long to categorize what she had written under one of the Common Application prompts. Ashley mentioned that it did take her a little while to do the final edit before adding it to her application, but her dad had looked it over to help.

Once Ashley finally began the main parts of the Common Application, she found that most of it was not too difficult. The demographic questions at the beginning were pretty easy; Ashley described it as essentially the type of information that you would fill out at the doctor's office. When she got to the questions about her high school, Ashley relied on the answer sheet that her counselor had provided with the information about the

school's CEEB code, the graduating class size, and the GPA scale, as well as where Ashley could find her class rank and GPA on her transcript.

Ashley worked on the activities section of the application during one of our observation meetings, and she found it to be a little bit harder to fill out. At first, Ashley told me she hadn't been totally sure what she should include in that section. It helped her to be able to talk about this section with her classmates in the guidance seminar course. "I had to like hear and see what others were putting in before I put it in myself, because I didn't really know what to put in," she told me. Although her counselor gave examples of activities, it was more helpful for her to chat about this part with her classmates to see what types of activities they were including.

After she felt like she had more of a guideline of what to include, based on her peers, she started out by writing down every activity she could think of, and then showed the list to her parents to see if they could think of anything else. What she came up with in the end was a list of activities that she felt were most closely related to her target career. "I just kind of listed, like, the main things I've done in high school that, like, are important," she told me,

> especially like all the things I've done for like, with like kids with disabilities. So like, all the, all those kinds of things I felt that were like, super important, especially since I want to do occupational therapy. So like I felt like I wanted to make sure I got all of those. Then I just kind of listed other things that like, like either working with kids or like working with other people in general.

When we met together in mid-November for an observation session, Ashley had her list of activities and was ready to start filling in her application form.

It was a little bit difficult for Ashley to determine her position title and the number of hours and weeks she spent on each activity. She felt that not all of her roles were clearly defined, and not all of her activities happened on a regular schedule. I asked Ashley to describe what she did for each of her activities, which she needed to fill in on the application, and then offered her some suggestions for possible role titles. We also spent some time together trying to count out the weeks per month and potential hours per week to include for each activity. As a former admissions officer, I noted how challenging this seemed to be and thought about how little this exact calculation had really mattered to me when I had been reviewing applications in the past. This part was meant to get a ballpark idea about students' level of commitment to activities, and I wondered if just asking students to list their top three activities would be more useful information and less time-consuming for students.

When Ashley was filling in descriptions for each activity, she found that there wasn't much space to do so – only about three lines. As a result, she ran out of space and had to rethink her responses several times. A few of her activities were also difficult for her to categorize within the drop-down menu choices available on the Common Application. Was her volunteer work with disabled students community service, or a school activity? It was also hard for her to say whether or not she planned to continue participating in an activity during college, since that seemed too far in the future to decide in the present.

Despite these minor challenges, Ashley moved through this section fairly rapidly. She ultimately included activities such as her sport, her volunteer work with disabled students, and her internship, which was a late addition to the list that she included after

noticing that "internship" was an option on the drop-down menu to categorize activities. During our meeting she wasn't sure how to rank-order her activities, so she ended up doing it later with her counselor during one of their meetings. "It was kind of hard because I was like, I don't know. There's no guidelines of like, what's more important than others," she explained to me. She ended up ranking activities based what she most enjoyed doing, what was most recent, and what she thought was the most important for her major.

After completing the main part of the Common Application, Ashley still had to answer a number of school-specific questions for each of the schools to which she was applying. Each college seemed to have a question about why she wished to attend that school, which was a little bit difficult for her because she wasn't sure how much to include in these answers. I asked her to describe to me why she was attracted to each school, and then helped by repeating her answers back to her so that she could write them down. It was interesting that her reasons for applying to each school, and thus her answers to these questions, were essentially the same: the school had an occupational therapy major or something related, the school was close to home, and she knew someone who had attended the school and liked it.

Ashley completed the Common Application during one of our working sessions together in early December. In totality, it only took Ashley about five weeks to complete the application form once she began it.

When we were reviewing her application together in December, Ashley and I came across one section where she had misunderstood the application question. In the section with questions about her parents' education, Ashley had initially filled in their

education level with the grade level that each of her parents taught, since they are both educators. I pointed this part out during her review and explained that the education level was actually referring to the highest level of education that each of her parents had completed. When she adjusted this part of the application, additional questions popped up about the type of degree and year of graduation for each of her parents. She said she would have to ask her parents for that information when she got home, because she didn't know "like the exact degree, the exact year and all that kind of stuff." I admitted to her that, as an adult, I didn't even know that exact information about my parents off the top of my head.

She also made some edits during our review on the application question that asked the level of degree she intended to pursue. She had initially put down that she would eventually pursue a doctorate, but she said she was going to change it to a Master's degree. I wondered if this was because she had started her internship and had learned more about what education was needed for her target career, or if this was related to her desire to move through postsecondary education as expeditiously as possible.

I also asked Ashley how she approached the new question on the application about COVID-19 and the question at the end of the application about whether there was anything else that she wished to include. She said that she hadn't chosen to answer the COVID question, because she didn't feel that anything critical had happened to her as a result of the pandemic. As for the 'anything else' question, she wasn't really sure what she would write for it. She told me, "like my uncle passed away suddenly, who I was extremely close with, at the beginning of the year, but it hasn't affected, like, like it hasn't affected my school, like grades or anything." She decided not to write anything about it,

because she thought her counselor was going to write something about her uncle's passing in his recommendation letter for her.

In some places on her application, it seemed like Ashley was trying to come up with more to write based on the word limit for a specific question. At one point she asked me about the word requirements for her essay: "do you think it's like necessary for it to be like 650? Or if it's less?" She was concerned that if she was significantly under the word limit, it would look like she hadn't put in enough effort. Her essay was actually 607 words, compared to the 650 word limit, so I assured her that was sufficient. In one of our observation work sessions, it also came up that Ashley was unsure of the degree programs offered at one of her schools, and she wasn't really sure whether contacting the admissions office to ask for clarification was appropriate. She asked me whether that was something she should do, and I told her she certainly could call the office and ask a question about the school's academic programs if it would be helpful to her. As a former admissions officer, I found it interesting that she was unsure about what constituted appropriate interaction with the admissions office.

Reflections on the Application

When reflecting on college application experience, Ashley said the hardest part was just finding the motivation to work on her application. She told me, "just kind of like getting it done was probably the hardest part. Like, it was like more the motivation." When I told Ashley that it surprised me that she had trouble finding the motivation, since during our observation sessions she was so focused, she explained that having meetings dedicated to working on her application helped her focus:

I think having this designated time that I had, like that was the one thing I'm working on and I'm not doing anything else, really helped, because… I had someone there like, like that was what we were doing, was super helpful. Because when I was out of school, like, I would like, I would open it up and be like, I don't want to do this right now… I didn't have that specific time and someone to just sit there and be like, okay, let's, like this is what we're working on."

I asked Ashley how she had kept herself organized during the application process, and she mentioned that writing down notes about each college and their application requirements was really helpful. "I have like, like a bunch of notes, which has been helping me through this," she told me, "so that I can write it down while I'm like doing something." Sometimes she would also take pictures of her notes on her phone, so that she could have access to an electronic copy in case she didn't have her notes with her. In addition to writing things down in a notebook or on her phone, she also bookmarked each college's website, as well as the Common Application and the Naviance websites, in her internet browser.

It was also really important for Ashley to have a school computer that she could take home to work on her applications. "I don't have my own home computer," she explained. "It's like for college, I'll get one, but I just have a school one for now." Her computer access was part of the one-to-one laptop program that her school offered. However, Ashley told me that students had to return their computers over the summer, so she didn't have her own computer for the summer before senior year. This was definitely a challenge in terms of working on her college materials. "That was probably the biggest thing," she explained,

because I didn't, I didn't have my own computer to kind of motivate like when I opened it… I got it back at the end of August, middle, or middle of August, which was still before school, but I never, like I didn't do much college stuff over the summer. Like I visited colleges, but I didn't do any of the application or any of that. Or think about even applying yet. So like it, maybe if I had my computer over the summer, it would have been different."

Although she felt that she had received a good amount of college preparatory support from her school, Ashley thought it probably would have been helpful for her to have had more direction on how to complete the application process. She felt that she didn't have a great grasp of when she should start the application and complete specific parts. Ashley explained that when she talked about the application process with her counselor, their conversations were more about her goals for the application process and less about a general timeline. "[It was] like, when is your first deadline? When do you, how early do you want to have it done?" Ashley would have preferred a little more direction. "I think more of a specific would, like guidelines and deadlines would help me because I have more motivation to, like, complete them than having it done on my own."

Ashley also reflected on how her experiences with school did not really influence her choice of career. I remembered asking her in our first meeting about how many science classes she would need to take for a degree in occupational therapy, and at that point she hadn't known. After she had been admitted to a five-year occupational therapy program at her top choice school, she told me:

I've actually had a hard time in some, like science isn't one of my, like, I don't find any of that stuff really easy. Like I always have to work a lot harder in that class.

So like, and I do have to take a lot of science classes to become an OT. So like, none of that has really shaped the way I thought about what I want to go into. Like, I don't really think I've put what classes I have to take with what I want to do as my career.

I wondered about where this disconnect had come from, but I was glad to see that Ashley knew a bit more about what type of courses would be required for her degree program prior to beginning college.

While she felt that her experiences with school did not really influence her career choice, her feelings about school did influence the way she approached college and the college application process. She elaborated on this more in our last meeting:

I think my thought process was like that, like I've always had to put so much, like I've always had to work so much harder to get what, like, what I wanted out and like the grades I wanted. So like I knew that like going [to] college and then having to do a lot more schooling after that wasn't, I was gonna overwork myself and by the end of it, I wouldn't want to be like, I wouldn't want to do it anymore. I'd be kind of sick of all my classes and wouldn't, possibly not finish what I was doing because it was so hard. So like, finding that program that I would be able to, like, I know when I am done and like, once that, I know I can go and get a job in the career I want, and not overworking myself.

Besides impacting her desire to get her credentials in the most direct route possible, Ashley's feelings about school also influenced how she completed her application. Her dislike of writing made her focus on getting her essay done the first time around in junior English class, and she submitted it almost completely unchanged on her final application.

She also had no desire to retake the SAT, partially because she didn't think it would be required by colleges, but also because she felt that testing was a big challenge for her.

When I asked Ashley if she wished there had been a space to talk about disability or special education on the application, she responded, "I never really thought about it, but like thinking about it more, like, what does my college know about my IEP? Like, do they, like I'm sure they know I have one… or do they?" We discussed how there was not really a place to self-identify a disability anywhere on the application. Ashley thought she might have answered a question about disability on one of the school-specific sections of the application, but she wasn't really sure. She felt like it was something she wanted schools to know:

> Which I feel like would be something I would want them to know because like, for some kids, they may not, like if they don't want to continue their IEP, but I do. Like I do want to still be able to get some services. So like, having colleges know that in advance, and like being able to like, have someone to, like that, like once I get accepted, like, being able to like ask someone who reaches out, and like giving me like things that I could have when I'm in college, would maybe help me more think about, like make my decision based on colleges. So like, being able to know that [they] have it and like things that they would take off my IEP and like what they would use, would probably be helpful when choosing a college.

Reflections on Special Education

For Ashley, special education had always been a positive experience. The special education services that she received helped her to feel more successful in school and made learning more enjoyable. "I think that like, it's always been, like, helpful towards

me… especially like, when I struggled without having any special education, like I knew I needed that help," she told me. "I never thought of it as a negative thing." While receiving special education services was helpful, Ashley still felt that academic work could be challenging. "I always had to work harder to get good grades," she explained, "and I still, like I still have to put a lot more work into my work than some others."

Ashley didn't really work with a special education teacher during her senior year. She elected not to take a skills development course, which was taught by a special education teacher, because she felt like it was often unproductive for her and that she had already learned how to use the skills that were discussed in the course. She didn't have a regular check-in with a special education teacher either, but felt that she knew who to talk to if she needed more support. Most of the time she only saw a special education teacher when she was volunteering as a mentor in the first-year skills development course, supporting younger students who received special educations services. However, she didn't feel like she had needed much support from a special education teacher in her last year of high school, especially since she was receiving support from her counselor in the college application process. "If I needed [help], I could ask and I would get it," she told me, "but I'd never really. I use more like my guidance counselor for things." She also felt that her accommodations in the classroom, many of which she continued to receive, were the most important source of support for her.

At the same time, Ashley felt like she would have accepted more help if it had been offered to her. "I was fine with what it was, but if I had that designated time with a teacher, like a special ed teacher, I feel like I would have had more help," she told me. "And I probably would have used more of their help, but like, like, I'm fine with the way

I did it." Although not supporting Ashley in an official capacity, Ashley felt like she did receive career advice and encouragement from the special education teachers who worked in the Connections program where she volunteered. This was helpful for Ashley as she made decisions about how to approach her college process. She explained,

> So [the teacher] had actually talked with me of different ways I could get to, like, working with kids… she said, like if I ended up not going into a school that had OT, of different ways that could come to the point of either being an OT or working what she does, or something like that. And then just kind of like going over schools and like, she had also commuted, and one of the other para[professionals] in the room had commuted, so like talking to them really had convinced me like it was the best. Like I knew it was, but knowing that like others did it that, like, I know went well helped.

While she thought she would have taken advantage of more support if it was offered, Ashley also said that she felt very comfortable asking for help, both with the college application process and her school work. "I was able to get help whenever I needed it," she told me,

> Like I could easily go down to like guidance or what, a special ed teacher, and get the help I needed. So there was nothing that like, I was like, there was never a time that I was like, oh, I need help with this, but I can't get it, like I'm kind of stuck. It was always, I'm able to send an email or go to someone and get the help.
>
> Ashley wasn't completely sure whether she had a special education transition

plan, but she told me that she had been asked about her postsecondary plans during her annual IEP meeting in her junior year. This meeting was also a time when her support

team discussed reducing her special education services in preparation for her transition to college:

> They talked about what I want, and I actually did my reevaluation last year, so it was more like, I think that's when I kind of had like, knocked down, knowing that like I wouldn't have as much service as I did last year in college. So like transitioning through less services so in college I wasn't, I didn't, I didn't go from a ton to like little.

She felt that the conversation around reducing her services was very collaborative and that she had been asked for her input in coming up with the plan. She explained, "it was kind of like, do you think it would be helpful to like, take that away? So you're ready?"

In our final meeting together, I asked Ashley what the word disability meant to her. She didn't feel that the word meant much; to her, it was just sort of a word that people used. "I don't really have like, an exact meaning in my head," she told me.

> I just kind of think, I think a lot of it is because I have some type of disability, but I also work with a lot of kids who have some type of disability. It's kind of, it doesn't really mean much to me at all. Like it's just kind of like a word that like describes something, but it's not like huge, like it doesn't really have like an exact meaning to me.

I asked her if her own experiences with special education had made her interested in working with students with disabilities, but Ashley told me that it was more her family experiences that made her interested in working with disabled people. She described how her mom had previously been a special education teacher, which had some influence, but it was more the experience she had of seeing her grandfather go into a nursing home

when he had Alzheimer's, and seeing that the supports he received there helped him. She enjoyed helping students with disabilities inside and outside of the classroom, and she was confident in her choice of career.

Concluding Thoughts

While Ashley's college choice process began long before senior year of high school, a large amount of it took place in the summer before and the fall of her final year. She knew for a long time that she wanted to pursue a four-year degree, but she did not decide to pursue a degree in occupational therapy until the summer before her senior year started. This was also the time period when she decided she wanted to commute to college for the first year, after her uncle's sudden passing. These two factors became the major criteria for Ashley when choosing a college, and because much of her exploration had been done before making these decisions, there was a disconnect between the exploration and selection phases of her college choice process. While Ashley described touring colleges as her main avenue of exploration, she only ended up applying to one of the schools she toured because the other schools did not have her target degree program. As a result, she ended up generating a shortlist based on the search tools available in Naviance and relied on anecdotes about each school from current or former students when making her decisions about where to apply. Her career focus guided her application process, and was in part motivated by her desire to move through postsecondary education as quickly as possible and into a job that she would enjoy. Narrowing in on a career path even earlier in the college process probably would have been beneficial for Ashley, but her experiences during the summer before senior year reminded me that it's impossible to know exactly what might influence a student's process until it happens. The

loss of her uncle was a defining factor for Ashley's selection process, and one which no one could have predicted prior to it happening.

Ashley's college choice process was also strongly influenced by important adults and one of her friends, with whom she did much of her college exploration. Ashley's parents both took her on college visits and provided assistance with her application. Her mother was the one who initially introduced the idea of a career in occupational therapy to Ashley, and encouraged Ashley to explore the field further. In addition to her parents, trusted educators at her school who shared their college experiences with Ashley were also important to her as she created her shortlist of schools. Her school counselor, who was a touchpoint for her throughout the college process, was influential in guiding her exploration process and helping her move through the application.

Having elements of the application integrated into the curriculum also made a difference for Ashley. She was able to complete her essay during her junior year as a graded assignment, which provided her with the structure, guidance, and feedback to strengthen her submission. While elements of the application process were also covered in the guidance seminar course, Ashley probably would have benefited from more directive instruction on completing the application. While she felt that she had received enough support, she also thought she would have taken advantage of additional support from teachers, had it been provided. This observation made me reflect on the delicate balance between support and independence that educators are trying to find during students' final year of high school, which may be even more challenging for special education professionals who are trying to prepare students for the inherent changes in how they will receive accommodations in college, if they receive them at all.

When Ashley and I met for the final time in March of her senior year, she had been admitted to her first choice school and had already submitted a deposit to attend. While she was excited to be done with the application process and to have a plan in place, she also was not ready to prepare for the transition to college. "Like some of it is I'm not ready to, like, think about what I'm doing next year," she told me. "Like I just want to stay in high school and not have to think about going, leaving." I remembered that she told me when we first met that college felt like a big decision and a big change, and it made me reflect on my own senior year of high school – how it felt like going to college was a huge transition, like everything was changing and I was leaving so much behind. I wondered if this was similar to what Ashley was feeling, and whether these feelings played into her reluctance to plan for her next steps. At the same time, I knew that she would want to be proactive about her transition to college, especially since she wanted to receive disability supports and would need to go through the process of formally requesting accommodations. I thought about how she would need to take a number of science courses, in which she felt she had struggled in the past, and how accommodations might be especially important for her when taking midterms or final exams. I also thought about how she felt like she always had to work harder in school in order to succeed, and I wondered whether she would continue to feel this way in college, and who she would become as a college student. Although she had changed quite a bit over the course of her college choice process, at the end she still felt like she was not completely ready for the next step.

CHAPTER FIVE: JESSICA

Meeting Jessica

Jessica was the second student to join my research project, and we met five times over the course of the fall and winter of her senior year, mostly in-person at either her school or the public library. We had our first meeting together in early November in an office in the special education learning center at her school. Of the three students I worked with, Jessica was the most reflective, and our conversations often ran over our allotted time because she had so much to share. I rarely needed to prompt her to provide more information, as she freely provided anecdotes and elaborated on her thoughts naturally over the course of our conversation.

Jessica was planning to apply to four-year schools, and she had found the college process to be extremely stressful up to the point when we began our meetings. At that point, she had begun to adjust to the idea of going to college and was starting to feel like she had a better idea of what she was looking for, although she was planning to enter college with an undeclared major. Between our first meeting on November 4th and our second meeting on November 8th, Jessica and her parents decided to try to get all of her applications submitted by the early action deadlines for her schools on November 15th. Thus Jessica ended up completing almost her entire Common Application in a period of less than two weeks. Since our second meeting was meant to be an observation, I was fortunate to be able to see a small part of her rapid application process.

It was clear from the start that Jessica's mom was a big support for her, and I learned early on that her mom had filled out the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) in October and was ready to provide any support that Jessica needed

throughout the process. Jessica told me that she was a good self-advocate, and she seemed very self-aware and mature for her age. She was the oldest of three children in her family, and her mom was a social worker who was very familiar with the special education system. Jessica also told me that it was in her nature to be a "people-pleaser," which was something I tried to be mindful of throughout our time together so as not to ask too much of her.

I found Jessica to be an engaging storyteller, and several times I got lost in her stories to the point that we both forgot the initial question that I had asked her. I found so much of what she shared to be compelling that I have included many of the ideas she shared with me verbatim in this story. The way she told her story of school and the college process is much more interesting than anything I could write.

School Experiences

School was often a difficult place for Jessica, and she had mixed feelings about it. As a self-described extrovert with social anxiety, she felt like school was an important social outlet for her, and she thrived off the opportunities for social interaction. Jessica also loved learning, especially reading, and she loved discussing literature in her English classes. At the same time, Jessica felt like the classroom was often a challenging space for her. "I would never say I like school," she explained to me. "I would say I like learning."

Math in particular had long been a struggle for her, and she felt that she was falling behind the other students in her class from a young age. This led the educators at her school to evaluate her multiple times for special education, beginning in the first grade. While her initial testing was inconclusive, her struggles in the classroom "kept

getting worse and worse," and eventually she was retested and placed on an IEP in third grade for a math-specific learning disability, ADHD, and a disability related to tracking, which is the ability to follow a line of text across a page when reading. Later on, in middle school, Jessica was also diagnosed with anxiety, depression, and motor ticks.

At first, Jessica was excited to receive special education services. "I thought this was amazing," she told me. "I get to receive the support, I get to go and have a small group with teachers. This is awesome, the best deal ever." However, despite feeling like her special education services continued to be helpful, as time went on she began to feel stigmatized by them. She explained:

I got to fifth grade and I, you know, it was really hard. I remember being very embarrassed. I would miss out on specials because I would have to take an extra math class. I would, you know, kind of be in the separate classroom, or I'd have to have someone in the class that would check in with me, take me out for a test. I felt very, you know, I was singled out in a way. And especially fifth and sixth grade, I considered going off of it just for the fact that I didn't want to deal with that.

Despite these feelings, Jessica continued receiving special education services throughout middle school, and once she went to high school she felt that special education was less stigmatizing. "I loved, though, freshman year when I got here and I felt like the services were kind of in my ballpark, that I could get them and it was not abnormal," she told me. "It was just, 'that's what you need.' I like that everyone kind of did their own thing, it wasn't as 'let me get into your business.'" Some of the services that she continued to receive in high school were extended time and small group testing, a

skills course that helped her develop organizational and time management skills, and dedicated time with a social worker and special education liaison. She continued to love reading and to enjoy her English and history classes in high school, but math and science, especially when it involved math, remained a challenge.

Jessica also felt like the special education services in high school were offered more willingly, whereas in middle school she got the impression that the school was trying to make her services as inexpensive as possible. "Middle school, oftentimes I felt like it was, 'well do you actually need that accommodation?'" she explained to me. "And I was like, umm, yeah, I kind of like it. 'Well, how often are you using it, actually?'" Jessica described feeling like her middle school IEP meetings were tense, with the educators in the room arguing about whether or not she needed certain accommodations. In contrast, she felt like the special education process in high school "was more, how genuinely can we support you?"

Although she felt less singled out in high school, her past experiences struggling with school work and receiving special education services left a lasting impression on her. She described to me how her challenges in the classroom had left her with deeply ingrained feelings of academic inadequacy:

> I would go to school and I would try so hard. Even if it was, like, just to sit in there and just be in the moment, like not daze off, like think about [other things] or doodle on my paper, like that was hard in itself. And then the fact that even when I would have a good day and I was hyper-focused, and I would look around and everyone was on problem eight and I was still on two, like that is infuriating. Especially for a child, you feel stupid, you feel terrible. You don't understand, and

I didn't understand why. You know, your mom says, "oh, well, because you learn differently. You go at your own pace," things like that. You don't care. It's just that I wasn't done in time. And there is something wrong with that, and the only conclusion can be is that it's negative and it's me. So I think that there was a lot of that, even in high school.

In retrospect, Jessica credited her support team outside of school, such as her therapist and her social worker, with providing her the most help to be academically successful. It was these professionals, along with her mom, who helped her to understand her disability diagnosis and what it meant for her in the classroom.

Jessica's experiences in the classroom also shaped her into a strong self-advocate. She felt that she wasn't always great at self-advocating, but over time she learned the benefits of asking for help. She also didn't want her teachers to perceive her as slacking off, and she found that advocating for herself in the classroom was one way to show her teachers how hard she was working. "I may have had teachers that think, that thought I was slacking off, that I didn't want to do the work, that I wasn't listening," she explained to me. "And with right reason. But in reality, it was not that at all. And in fact it was probably more energy that I was putting into their class than they would have suspected, ever." Jessica's mom was also a big advocate for Jessica, and I wondered if Jessica had learned some of her self-advocacy skills from her mom. She told me that her mom insisted that she always know what her accommodations were so that she understood what she needed in the classroom. "She put a highlighted, like, list in my binder," Jessica told me, "and I hid it because it was absolutely mortifying."

Outside of the classroom, Jessica participated in quite a few extracurricular activities during high school, many of which revolved around working with students with disabilities. Jessica told me that she had first become interested in working with disabled students as a result of a major spinal surgery that she underwent during her sophomore year of high school. Prior to her surgery, her major school activity was playing field hockey on her high school team, but she was unable to continue playing after she had recovered. Losing the ability to play her sport was devastating for her. "It was a huge part of my life," she told me:

> It was a huge part of how I made friends at first. And I had just basically had a bunch of hardware put in me and [was] told that I can't do something that I had done for years, and I didn't know what to do. I thought, what else do you do in high school? I don't have many friends. I don't, that was my activity. That was my social outlet.

Since she could no longer participate in varsity sports, one of her special education teachers suggested that she join the local Unified Sports group, which is run by the Special Olympics program and pairs nondisabled and disabled students together to play intramural sports. She joined the Unified Sports basketball and track team in her junior year, and through this program she began a friendship with a young man with down syndrome, which she credited with piquing her interest in working with students with disabilities in other venues. After this, she also began volunteering for several community organizations that worked with disabled people and offered to be a mentor for younger students at her high school who received special education services. In addition to these activities, Jessica was also the captain of her school's academic decathlon team

and worked several jobs outside of school, including a job where she shadowed a registered Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapist as she worked towards her certification in ABA therapy.

Although she had come a long way in her educational journey and felt like she finally understood herself better as a learner, Jessica was not entirely convinced that she was college material when we first met. She had never taken an Advanced Placement (AP) class in high school and felt like she might not be smart enough to be admitted to college, even though she had a 3.4 grade point average. "I still do believe that I am not the smartest person," she told me, despite being told otherwise by her parents and teachers. "I constantly feel like I'm like running twice as fast while everyone's walking. And I am just trying to keep up at a baseline."

Deciding

Jessica was not always planning to go to college. "In seventh grade, I was convinced I was gonna go right out of [high] school to art school and become a tattoo artist," she told me at our first meeting. She also briefly fantasized about moving to Europe and opening a cake bakery. In her young mind, college was the expected, boring next step after high school, and she felt the urge to resist it.

As she moved up to high school, she began to see the benefits of college, but still felt unsure if it was the right path for her. She shared:

> When I started talking about post-grad planning in sophomore year, early junior
> year, I said… I want to go to college because it opens more opportunities, and I
> truly do believe that, but I said, I don't want to go right away. Because, one, I

don't think I'm ready, two, I don't, I don't see that going well for me, and three, I

don't know what I want to do.

Jessica questioned her ability to succeed academically and socially in college. Her social

anxiety made her worry about interacting with peers in a college setting. "There is

nothing scarier to me than being in a room with teenage girls and guys," she told me.

This anxiety, combined with her past academic challenges, left her concerned that college

would just be a repetition of the struggles she had faced in high school. "I had kind of

such a, especially in high school, rough time, academically, emotionally, that I just said,

I'm not doing this again," she explained:

> I'm not going to feel stupid in a classroom any longer, I'm not going to feel like a
>
> nobody. I'm not going to struggle to get up every day and have to put on a smile
>
> for people who don't really care.

Her academic experiences in school also made her question whether she could

even get into college. She had a particular vision of what constituted a college-bound

student: someone who took Advanced Placement (AP) classes and earned all "A" grades,

or someone who did life-changing volunteer work, like founding an orphanage. Since

these were not her experiences, she questioned whether she was "college material." In

particular, the issue of not taking AP classes came up multiple times in our conversations,

and really seemed to preoccupy her. I wondered if it was connected to those feelings she

had in her elementary and middle school classrooms of always being several steps behind

the other students. These deeply-rooted feelings of academic inadequacy made her feel

like college might not possible for her; she told me, "I especially always thought that I

wasn't good enough to get into college, especially because of my learning style." Later,

once she had finished her applications, she reflected on her feelings about college and elaborated on these thoughts:

> I think when I was in the building at the moment, I was like, I can't do this [expletive]. To be honest with you. I think I was like, there's no way I can do, eight more years of this? No, like, I can't, I just can't. Like, I do, I think I'm dumb very often and I think I'm incapable, or part of me does. And do incapable and dumb people go to college? Is it worth it? … Do people who don't take all APs? Do people who don't have like scary IQs? Do people who don't save the world in one stroke, go to school? Is it worth it?…Those were genuine thoughts, and that was a huge factor into it.

Another factor that concerned Jessica was that she didn't have a target career. "I think the big choice was I was like, I don't know what I want to do," she explained to me, "and I felt like in my head, still a little bit in my head, you go in to what you want to do." She initially felt that it was important to know what her intended college major and eventual career would be before making a decision about college, and it felt like an overwhelming decision to make at such a young age. However, as she began looking into her college options more seriously in her senior year, she not only realized that she could enter college with an undeclared major, but also that choosing a major would not necessarily restrict her career path. "A lot of people you meet who are in their specific areas did not have a specific degree in that thing," she explained to me, "I didn't know that 'til this year. I didn't realize that if you got a bachelor's, you can kind of take that where you want, but it just opens that opportunity."

While she was beginning to understand that a college degree would create career opportunities for her, she also realized that she wasn't sure what she would do after high school if she didn't go to college. Her past career aspirations – tattoo artist, British baker – seemed less realistic to her as a junior and senior in high school. Part of the reason that these options felt less feasible was that Jessica felt like there was an unspoken expectation that she should go to college, because that's what the vast majority of students from her high school did after graduating. Since she attended a well-resourced high school in a middle-class town, it was not surprising to me that college was the typical postsecondary pathway for high school graduates or that there was a strong college-going culture at her high school. However, it was hard for Jessica to pinpoint from where exactly this sense of social pressure to attend college was coming. Her parents were very supportive of her pursing whatever postsecondary plans she wanted, whether or not that meant going to college, and she acknowledged that her high school also messaged that there were other postsecondary options besides college. However, she still felt strongly that college was the expected next step, and that pursuing other options, like trade school or going directly into the workforce, were inferior. Even taking a gap year seemed unacceptable to her. "I remember when I was like, 'Mom, what do I do if I tell someone that I'm taking a gap year?'" she recalled. "I was like, that is so humiliating, I would not. I could not do it. This town? No. No, you have to go somewhere."

Not only did Jessica feel that there was a social expectation to go to college, but also that there was an expectation that she should apply to selective schools. When we first met, she told me that she felt the pressure to "aim for Ivy, settle for state." It sounded like this pressure was primarily from the social environment at school, since many

students from her high school went on to attend selective colleges. I thought about how this pressure was an interesting consequence of social class, and whether this type of social pressure also informed her feelings of inadequacy in the classroom. It is not such a huge leap to think about how the elementary school student who finishes a math test in record time is labelled as excelling, and how middle-class students who excel are expected to go on to bigger and better things. This unspoken pressure also translated in some ways to Jessica's hesitation about going to college, since she felt that the ultimate goal was to attend a high-caliber institution. She voiced this in one of our last meetings, when she recounted that she had thought, "is it worth going to an 80% [acceptance rate] school when there are people who go to 20% [acceptance rate] schools?" Jessica constantly compared herself to her peers, or to what she thought she was expected to do, and this was a huge source of pressure and stress for her.

When Jessica finally decided in her junior year that college was the best option for her after high school, she felt incredibly anxious and stressed about moving forward with the college choice process. She told me that she was so overwhelmed by the idea of applying to college that she couldn't even say the word "college" without feeling sick. Her mother had to take the lead on planning her early college visits, since Jessica had no motivation or desire to plan the next steps.

Jessica shared that in these early stages of her college process, she wished that she had received more support from her school. She didn't fully understand the benefits of a college degree, nor the process of pursuing one, and she wished someone had provided her with more guidance as she was considering her options. In her senior year she had been assigned to work with the school's transition coordinator, who specifically worked

with students with disabilities on postsecondary planning, but the meetings were too infrequent to feel helpful to her and she stopped pursuing this support. "I was kind of on my own with my mom, which was really difficult," she shared. Jessica also acknowledged that the educators at her school may have offered supports earlier in high school that she had ignored because she wasn't ready to think about college at the time.

By the time Jessica and I first met in the fall of her senior year, Jessica had decided to pursue college and was considering potential majors in forensic science or special education, although she was planning to apply to college with an undeclared major. It ultimately came down to her realization that "there's more opportunities with further education" regardless of what major she decided to pursue, and her feelings that there wasn't a viable postsecondary alternative to college. "I was kind of all mad about how I was gonna go to college and have to make up my mind about what I wanted to do with my life," she told me, "but I'm gonna have to do that more if I don't go. So I might as well stall for another four years and see where it gets me."

Exploring

At first Jessica really didn't know where to begin in the process of exploring her college options. There were so many potential colleges to choose from, and since she didn't have a target major or career path, it was difficult for her to find a place to start. The idea of searching for colleges felt so overwhelming that, initially, she refused to engage in the process. "I would cry every time someone brought it up," she told me. "I just felt like, no, there's too many options. I don't know what I want to do. You know what I mean? I refused." The best advice she received in this initial phase of exploration was from her school counselor, who told her in her junior year to just start touring

different size schools in different areas of the region in order to start figuring out what type of school she liked. So she started by taking tours of "a big college, a smaller college, medium-sized college, and then a private college and a public college" in different areas of New England.

Touring schools was really important to her, and it was her major avenue of college exploration. It was important for her to see what was available on each campus and to get a feel for whether or not she would fit in with the campus community. However, at the beginning of her exploration process, touring schools was also extremely stressful and emotionally painful for her. Jessica described how her mother had to book her first few tours in the spring of her junior year because she had no motivation nor desire to plan them herself. She became so distraught during one of her first tours that she had to leave early. "We didn't make it because I broke down half way through," she told me.

Although campus tours were important for her to get a feel for what she wanted from a school, Jessica found the tours to be repetitive, exhausting, and time consuming. "You know it is dedication," she told me. "You have to take the entire day pretty much to go to the school." She also felt like many parts of the campus tours were boring and unnecessary. We laughed as she joked, "I remember after the fourth tour, I was like, if they say this is the mailroom one more time – I'm not even admitted in here! I don't need to know where I'm picking up my Amazon packages." She also felt like her ADHD made it difficult to stay focused when she was visiting colleges. "It was so exhausting," she shared. "Also me and my ADHD… I feel like, we'd be like an hour in and my mom would be like, 'I'm losing you.' And I'm like, really trying. I'm trying." Overall, she

found the process to be draining, and it took all of her emotional and mental resources to keep touring schools.

Her mom was a major source of support for her throughout this process. Along with organizing her initial tours, her mom tried to keep the tour process more casual for her at the beginning of her exploration in order to make it seem less daunting. Jessica credited her mom with being the reason she made it through the touring process, and she shared with me that she thought it was embarrassing that her mom had to do so much of the organization work for her because she was emotionally unable to do it herself. Jessica prided herself on being pretty self-sufficient, so I could tell that this was at least a minor source of shame for her. At the same time, I wondered whether she was so different from her peers in this regard. How many high school seniors organize all their tours on their own, without the input or assistance of their parents? However, I understood her point – she didn't have the motivation to drive her exploration process, so her mom did it for her. Jessica mentioned that she knew that a lot of her friends had similar trouble with motivation, especially her friends who also had IEPs.

Over time, the college touring process became less daunting, and Jessica starting to figure out what qualities were attractive to her in different schools. Her mindset about going to college also began to change, and as she learned more about the schools she visited from tour guides and admissions representatives, she became more comfortable with the idea of college. "I was like, ok, that kind of sounds ok," she told me. "This sounds fine." She also proved to be a very discerning consumer of her college tours, and started to notice patterns in the ways that schools were presented. "All the tours I went to, people said, 'you will not be a nobody here. You will talk to your professors. You'll have

one-on-one,'" she shared. "I feel like that might be a little bit of a canned line, just the college process." She also looked for elements of the tour that made particular schools stand out. She shared the example of tutoring programs. "They're like, 'oh, we have a tutoring program…' So does everyone, what makes yours different?" she told me. "So I look for those factors, and that's kind of how I decided where I might want to consider." In the end, she toured about nine schools and eventually narrowed her initial shortlist down to five.

For Jessica, it was also important to try to remove herself from the social pressure of attending a more selective institution. "The other biggest thing that helped me was ignoring people," she told me:

> And that sounds so bad, but I was so focused on you know, you hear the name, Northeastern and B[oston] C[ollege], and in reality, not a lot of kids go to Northeastern and BC. But you don't hear about that, because you only hear about the ones that do. Or at least that's how I felt. And so I kind of just said, you know what, I was getting so much stress from other people that I was like, that's their process. I'm not part of their process. I'm not going to be a part of it. They can talk about it, but I would be straightforward and be like, 'I don't want to talk about this to be honest. It stresses me out and I wish you the best of luck.'

This was necessary for her in order to alleviate some of the stress she felt around college and to allow herself the space to try to understand what she was looking for in a college, rather than only thinking about the name or brand of the school.

While her mom was instrumental to her college exploration process, Jessica described her college search as being very independent from her school. She wished that

she had received more concrete guidance about the stages of the college process as well as a more holistic view of what she would need to do in each phase. At the same time, Jessica recognized that some topics about college had been covered in her junior year guidance seminar and that she had not paid much attention to the guidance provided at that point. Junior year felt like it was way too early to be thinking about the college process, and Jessica was still so overwhelmed by the idea of college that she wasn't ready to absorb more information. "At that point, I'm like, check me out. I don't care," she described. "I was just too full of fear and I ignored it." Her experiences reminded me that not all students will fit into a traditional timeline for the college choice process, and that each student will come to the process if and when they decide they are ready to do so. However, students who are not ready to proceed on their high school's timeline may be at a disadvantage, because they will miss out on valuable resources. For Jessica, the third semester of junior year was too early, and she missed out on the beneficial information that her counselor shared in the junior guidance seminar. "I was told I need to have this essay done, which I did not do. I was told that I should start touring. I didn't want to do that," she reflected. "I just think that like, it was hard. It was hard to start."

As we talked about her exploration process, Jessica also shared that she had been hesitant to engage with college admissions personnel. "I remember when my mom was like, 'Oh, you can email [name of university],' and I was like, pffft, no. What am I going to say?" she recalled. "You know, I think part of that was fear of like, they're gonna be like, 'Oh, I don't want you for an interview,' or not respond or something. But they aren't exactly as accessible." From my experience working in admissions, I knew that hundreds of students called or emailed our admissions office every day, and I wondered whether

her perception of admissions as inaccessible had been a barrier to her receiving information that would have helped her. I also wondered if this hesitancy was rooted in her past experiences with school and her concerns that she wasn't college material. Once she had come around to the idea that contacting an admission officer was permissible, she asked me in one of our meetings for my advice on how to approach the interaction so that she wouldn't "be looked at as a nag." We discussed questions that she might ask an admissions officer in a one-on-one interaction, and she took notes in her college notebook so that she would be prepared for one of her upcoming college visits.

Selecting

After attending many college tours between the spring of her junior year and the fall of her senior year, Jessica finally began narrowing down her list of options. Her first criterion for selection was whether or not a school offered at least one of majors that she was considering: psychology, forensic science, or special education. While these were her primary interests in the fall of her senior year, she was planning to apply with an undeclared major. "I said early on I'm going in undeclared," she told me. Even though she knew that declaring a major was not a requirement for application, Jessica still felt pressure to enter college with a career plan in place, and she saw going in 'undeclared' as a type of resistance to the status quo. It seemed that some of this pressure was from her social setting, with many of her peers having more established career aspirations, and that some of the pressure was from her own lingering preconceptions about the purpose of college.

Size was also an important factor, but it was hard for Jessica to decide exactly what size school she wanted. "I think on paper, especially because of my IEP, I had

assumed that a smaller school would be better," she explained, "just because that individual attention, extra support. However, I found that like, some of these schools had as much kids as my high school, a little more, and I was like, I don't know if I necessarily want that." She was concerned that if a school was too small, it would limit her opportunities to meet new people. Jessica also wondered whether the small class sizes that tour guides touted would mean that there would be only a few students in her classes as her coursework became more specialized within her major. She wanted to find a school that provided a balance of social opportunities and individualized support: "I definitely was like, I want to see a new face every day. And that's what I said. I said I want a new face every day, but I want not to be a complete number."

Her search for a school that felt like just the right size proved to be difficult. Many of the schools she visited had the small, supportive community feeling that she was looking for, but just seemed too small for her. "I don't know how many times I've said, oh, I just wish it was bigger," she shared. She decided she wanted a mid-sized school, which to her meant a school that had between 6,000 and 7,000 students, and it seemed impossible to find such a school that met her other selection criteria. "That just didn't seem to exist," she told me, "and maybe I didn't look hard enough because there were other factors I needed to consider. But I was like a thousand, fifteen hundred kids is not a lot. Seventeen thousand is too many."

While size was a major consideration, geographic setting was less important. Jessica was only considering colleges in the New England region, mainly because those were the ones that she was able to tour, but she had no preference in particular for location. She told me,

One of the big questions is like, 'where would you want to be? Like, in a city? Would you want to be in the suburbs?' And I was like, I don't really know. I don't care because, honestly, at the end of the day, I'll spend most of my time on campus, and I'll find something to do no matter where I am.

However, this was a change over the course of her exploration process, as initially she thought she didn't want to be in a city. Then, after touring an urban school and loving it, she decided that urbanicity didn't really matter to her. Although she ultimately had no preferences around urbanicity, her intentions to spend most of her free time on campus meant that she wanted a school with a vibrant, bustling campus community. She felt that having an active social scene was important for her mental well-being, and she noticed that some campuses she toured seemed to lack the social setting she wanted. "I noticed that commuter campuses, it was dead on a Saturday," she described to me. "Like I don't want to do that. I'm gonna sit in my room and be depressed, like it's not gonna work for me."

Although Jessica intended to continue to pursue disability accommodations in college, the only disability-related campus service that she considered when compiling her shortlist was strong mental health services.

After Jessica had explored her options and had begun to identify her desired criteria, she and her mom sat down together and created a list of colleges for her to apply to using the search tools in Naviance. Jessica learned about Naviance during her junior and senior guidance seminar, and while she was resistant to using it at first due to her initial repulsion at the idea of college, she actually found it to be very helpful once she "made peace with it." She also used Naviance to look at the average GPA of admitted

students in order to get an idea of her chances of admission at specific schools. "I aimed for schools that I could definitely get into," she told me. I wondered whether this was due in part to a fear of rejection, or whether it was tied in with her feelings of academic inaptitude. Much later on, when Jessica reflected back on her college process, she realized that she probably could have applied to much more competitive schools.

Her final shortlist for applications was composed of schools that she liked based on her tours, and schools that she had not toured but that had a combination of the majors that she was considering. However, her shortlist changed over the course of the fall of her senior year and even during the few weeks when she was completing her applications. As she toured more schools and re-evaluated her options, she moved schools on and off her shortlist multiple times. She described how "more times than not, I was like, I don't like this, off the list, and then [the school] ended up going back on the list just because you're not gonna find that one perfect fit." In this way, although her exploration process began first, much of the exploration and selection stages of Jessica's college process happened concurrently.

Not only did her tours help her to solidify her selection criteria, but her experiences on tours shaped her feelings about each school on her shortlist. For example, when we first met in November, Jessica had her heart set on a particular out-of-state public school, which she had not yet visited. However, her campus tour and her interactions with an admissions representative left a negative impression on her. While her tour guide was showing them around, Jessica noticed a group of current students mocking the tour group. "I was like, that doesn't make me feel good, that doesn't make me feel welcome," she reflected. She compared this experience to other tours she had

taken, where the current students were playing football on the quad or participating in other activities.

Her feelings about the school only worsened when she had a phone call with an admissions representative:

I met with this admissions counselor and I literally left feeling, like, terrible. I met with her, I have never felt more like, 'get off the phone with me. I have no interest in talking to you.' And I was like, and I kind of was like, oh my gosh, this is foreshadowing. As in, like, she doesn't want to talk to me, I'm just a number for her. Am I going to just be a number at this school?

She compared this interaction to one she had with an admissions representative at a smaller school. "I remember there was a counselor from [small private college], who got back to me right away," she told me:

He was like, 'oh, you know, check in if you're here. I'd love to have,' you know what I mean? …it really did make a difference between like, feeling wanted and feeling like, [the admissions representative at the larger school] was like, basically, we're understaffed. It's in the hat now. Go away.

Jessica admitted that she had tried to ignore these feelings because she felt like there were other factors she really liked about the larger school. She kept it on her shortlist because she had been so sure that it was the perfect school for her, and while she was disappointed with her experience on campus, she couldn't let go of it completely.

When crafting her shortlist, Jessica also thought about how a school's admissions statistics and the values they emphasized would translate to her chances of admission. Did she have the specific piece of the puzzle that each school was looking for? On some

of her campus tours, she felt like the student qualities that the tour guides and admissions representatives highlighted were a mismatch for her. She recalled:

> I remember I went to [small, private liberal arts school], and they said, 'Oh, well 75% of our students take an AP class. So, minimum one, you know, most of them are taking three.' And I was like oh, and I remember thinking, like, do you have, I remember saying, 'do all the students?' And they were kind of like, 'most students, yes. In fact, we don't really have anyone that is not, hasn't been in honors.' And I was like, so basically, if you're in regular ed[ucation] classes, they're not looking for you. Again, that could have been the conception I got from that one student on the student panel, but that was the outlook I was getting.

She felt that her chances of getting admitted to this particular school, even if they accepted 75% of their applicants, were low because she hadn't taken AP classes, and that seemed to be a requirement. Jessica contrasted this experience to another small college, where the institutional agents sent the message that community-building and service to others were the characteristics they were looking for in prospective students. This felt more promising for Jessica, since she felt like she had demonstrated these qualities in her activities.

Jessica's experiences with admissions officers and tour guides also reminded me of how influential institutional agents can be in shaping students' selection process. The way a college is presented in these brief interactions can provide students with critical information, but it can also change a student's perception of the school. For Jessica, the interactions she had with students and admissions officers not only changed her

perceptions of the schools she was visiting, but also her perceptions of the college process as a whole. She explained:

> I can see why admissions is such a, not game, but such an industry, because it makes all the difference. I've had several different experiences that completely transformed the way I saw a school, as much as I tried for it not to be, it [did] completely. So that's kind of key into it, too, about what schools I said, okay, this is finally going to be what I'm going to apply to.

When we first met, Jessica was intending to apply to five colleges, with one clear frontrunner. Ultimately, she applied to nine colleges and no longer had a clear favorite. Her shortlist included two less-selective, in-state public universities; two out-of-state public universities, one less-selective and one selective; and five small, less-selective private colleges. All of the schools to which she applied accepted at least 70 percent of applicants. Although she had a better sense of what she was looking for in a school as she entered the application phase, she still wasn't completely certain. "I approached it with where am I going to be able to have a social life? Be happy, but also like a curriculum that I'm comfortable with," she described. "Some things are just a no. I didn't want a 400 person lecture, no thank you! Others, I'm a little more unsure about." This was probably her biggest challenge in the selection phase; she felt that there were so many options, and she didn't know exactly what she wanted in terms of an academic major and learning environment. She explained to me:

> you have some schools that offer 100 classes, you know, 100 kids in my class, others that offer thirteen, yet they expect me to know which one I want when I haven't had that experience. I've had 20 kids in my class since I was 13 years old

with one teacher. I don't know if I could do well with lectures. I don't know if I

could do well with eight people, would I want to kill all them? I don't know,

would I lose my mind with a lecture? It's hard because it's kind of like, you're

asking me to make a choice on an experience I haven't had. That's why I think

majors are kind of silly, because what do you want to do with your life? I don't

know. I like turtles. Does that mean I should be a marine biologist? Probably not.

And that's kind of the label that was hard for me.

Applying

The majority of Jessica's application process happened rapidly. She initially

planned on submitting her applications for the January and February application

deadlines, but ended up shortening her timeline and completing almost all of her

applications by the early action deadlines for her schools in mid-November. She made

this decision with her parents during the first weekend in November of her senior year,

which happened to be right in between our first meeting, which was on a Friday, and our

second meeting, which was on the following Monday. I was surprised by this rapid

change in direction in only four days' time, but Jessica explained to me that there were

benefits to applying early. "You get to look at more scholarships ahead of time," she told

me, "and also, I think that my mom just knew that I would need that extra time to

consider everything. So it was more of like an emotional and financial situation."

Luckily, Jessica had started meeting with her school counselor on a biweekly

basis in the fall of her senior year, and her counselor had been helping her prepare for the

application process. Jessica cited these meetings as a real game-changer for her. Her

counselor was able to help her apply the information she had been learning in her fall

guidance seminar class to the actual application process, and these meetings created a space for Jessica to start and work on completing her application in a structured and supported way. While her counselor's support was critical for her, it was her mom and her social worker who had been the catalysts for these meetings, and she doubted that she would have set them up without their encouragement. Jessica felt that many of her peers could also have benefited from this one-on-one support, and reflected on how other students may not have had anyone to suggest they take advantage of this type of resource. "It's a shame because I feel like so many other kids could, like, absolutely accelerate the process if they have someone to sit down and do it with them," she told me. "I had to be very proactive, and I had to be very encouraged by other people. Because it was not something that I did very willingly with open arms, and it's not common enough that it's just offered."

These meetings were especially important because, while Jessica felt that her counselor had covered a lot of the same information during her guidance seminar course, it had been a lot of information all at once, and she felt like it had been too difficult to process. She described:

> we discussed how to translate your classes to your common app. The same day we talked about how to get a copy of your transcript… what form you need to get to file a request for your transcript, then – it was a lot of information. It was to the point where I was like, what? …because there's so much information being thrown at once.

Jessica also remembered that her counselor had given them time to work on their applications during the seminar course, but that she hadn't felt ready to work on her

application at that point. "Did I take advantage of it? No. That's the difference," she told me.

> I actually believe there was a time that we were filling out this in class, and I don't think I did it. I think I was in denial. I think I didn't want to hear, and I think I ignored it and moved on.

While Jessica took some of the responsibility for her lack of motivation to work on her application during class, she also wondered if the classroom context had played a part in her difficulty focusing on the application. "Would that be because part of the dynamic is, not to scapegoat, but like, I was in a giant classroom, there's distractions," she wondered. "Probably. I was probably like, screw this, it's seven in the morning."

Jessica's counselor helped her understand the various parts of the application and, in one case, stepped in to help her resolve a confusing situation in regards to one of the schools on her initial shortlist. The school's application had a question about whether she was on an IEP, and when Jessica answered affirmatively, another question popped up asking if she wanted to continue to receive disability services in college. Since Jessica knew she wanted to access academic accommodations in college, she answered affirmatively again. "Little did I know that I had just agreed to put my application on pause until I reached out to this other group," she told me.

> And I get this letter in the mail saying, like, "Jessica, this is your formal request to please, you know, like, respond to…" And I'm like, hold on, what is going on here? And it was like, "your application has been on pause." And I was like, wait. So I ended up having to go to guidance and saying, "what does this letter mean? Like why am I paused?" And he had to call the admissions office and they said,

"oh, she had, she had said that she was on an IEP but never submitted her IEP. And therefore, her application was on pause until she had this interview." And I was like, I didn't know any of this. I just clicked yes, I'm on an IEP. You know what I mean?

Navigating the "lingo" and the logistics of applications was tricky for Jessica, so she was glad to have her counselor's help translating what parts of the application meant. I had to admit that I was a bit concerned after hearing this particular anecdote, and I wondered why a college would ever pause a student's application as a result of their response to a question about their disability status. Jessica shared that, luckily, this school was not one of her top choices, but it seemed to me that this was an obvious barrier for students with disabilities who wanted to continue to receive accommodations in college.

As in the other stages of her college choice process, Jessica's mom was once again a major source of support for Jessica in completing the application. "She offered time and time and time and time and time again, 'oh we can sit down and we can go through it. Let's sit down and go through it,'" Jessica shared. "I just wouldn't let her." Part of her reluctance to work on the application was the result of a lack of motivation, but it was also partially due to feeling stressed and fearful about the process. When I asked her what was driving her fear, she explained, "it was definitely like fear of change, fear of decision-making, fear of, just lack of motivation. I didn't want to do it."

First Steps: Standardized Testing and Recommendations

Like many of the students at Middletown High School, Jessica's college application process began with taking a standardized college admissions test and requesting a letter of recommendation from a teacher in her junior year. What may have

been different for Jessica about this process was that she took these steps towards completing the college application before she had decisively committed to pursuing college as a postsecondary option. However, since this was the course of action recommended by her school counselor, Jessica went through the process of registering for standardized tests in her junior year.

Since she was planning to request disability accommodations for the test, she was advised to begin the registration process even earlier than her peers. She had taken the PSAT in her sophomore year without accommodations as a practice test, and the experience was awful for her. "When I took the PSATs, I was like, I wasn't even done," she remembered. "I wasn't close to being finished. I was absolutely wanting to cry, because everyone was bringing up all their papers and I'm sitting there like, I have 20 more questions to get through." After struggling with the PSAT, she knew that she wanted to seek accommodations for the SAT. When she told her counselor this, he suggested they begin the process right away. "He was like, 'alright, we gotta get that going right now,'" she explained. "And I was like, 'I don't take the SATs for another year,' and he's like, 'we have to get it going right now.'"

It was a good thing that Jessica's counselor encouraged her to be proactive, because getting the College Board to approve her accommodations turned out to be a long and difficult process. "It was back and forth communication," Jessica described. "It was me, basically I felt like I was on trial, saying I need the help that I would get normally." She estimated that the whole process took about six months because the College Board initially denied several of her normal testing accommodations and required her to provide additional proof that these accommodations were necessary.

Luckily, her special education teacher was a strong advocate for her and helped her navigate the appeal process. She finally was able to receive accommodations to take the test in a private setting, to have extended time, and to receive breaks during the exam, but it was a stressful and emotionally-taxing process. She shared:

I ended up getting them, but it was a lot of like, I mean, it got to a point where it was like, 'what can you do to prove that?' And I'm like, it takes me four hours to do a test. What do you mean? I can prove to you by the tears that were dripping down, you know what I mean? So that was, that was pretty hard.

When it came to test preparation, Jessica didn't spend much time trying to study for the SATs. "I didn't have the time," she explained. "I was focusing on my homework, because that was hard enough for me to get done. And never mind taking a one hundred dollar class." She felt like her energy was better spent on her school work, and that trying to study for the SAT was somewhat futile. "Literally, the book was this thick," she told me, describing the prep book her mom had gotten for her. "I was a little, 'don't test me' with that subject."

She took the SAT at her school on a weekday in the spring of her junior year, and despite having accommodations, it was another awful experience. When she received her score, she was so upset with it that she felt the urge to try to re-take the test, and she had to be convinced by her support team not to do so. She told me:

It is one of the worst feelings I've ever had in my entire life… because it made me feel so dumb. And as someone who, especially with my IEP, has always felt extremely unintelligent, it made me feel absolutely awful. Because it's, it's basically saying you scored beyond below average for all of the hard work and

effort that you have put in in the last 12 years. And I stand by that. So I had initially literally burst out crying, and just said that I'm going to take it again, and do it, and take it again. And everyone said, "why would you take it again? Why would you take it again, especially with everything else, you're better off putting your energy into other things than re-taking it, and just going test-optional." I didn't, at this point, I hadn't toured any colleges, so I did not know that it genuinely was test-optional. And I was assured time and time again that it really would not affect my application… But that was, that was a harsh blow.

Receiving scores that were "below benchmark" also made Jessica question whether she would be able to get in to college.

After she had recounted this experience, I asked Jessica what advice she had received about initially taking the SATs, given that many schools had adopted test-optional policies in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Had anyone told her that she might not need to take them at all? "Yes," she told me, "but I ignored them. I had been told since I was in third grade, 'on the SATs, this is what will be there.'" Having heard about the SATs for most of her life, it was hard to believe that she didn't necessarily need to take them. It also seemed to be the counseling office's policy to encourage students to take the SATs, in case they did end up needing them for one of their applications. In retrospect, had she understood how many colleges had adopted test-optional policies, Jessica felt she probably would not have gone through the stress of taking the SATs. "Everything on that test, I don't think is a fair way of showing what I've learned in the past few years."

Before the end of her junior year, Jessica also took the step of requesting a college recommendation letter from one of her teachers, which was encouraged in her junior guidance seminar course. She found it hard to choose a teacher for her recommendation letter because she didn't feel like she had very strong relationships with any of her academic subject teachers. "So that was hard, because I felt like they said very clearly, 'do someone who is your academic teacher. Don't do a social worker, don't do a specialist teacher.' And I was like hmmm…" She ended up choosing one of her co-science teachers who had taught her in two subjects, which made Jessica feel like the teacher knew her a little better. Jessica had also come to school early to get extra help from this teacher and had volunteered at one point to partner with a new student in her class, which she felt reflected well on her. "She had seen a lot of sides that I hold close," she told me, "the fact that I would visit her because I would need that extra support. I held that close. The fact that I was open to other people, that I wanted to be a team player."

Jessica requested a recommendation from this science teacher during her junior year, but then she became close with a teacher in her school's alternative education program for students with disabilities during her senior year. She decided to ask that teacher for a recommendation as well, "just as a backup." This teacher hadn't taught Jessica directly, so it was going to be a supplemental recommendation. In November of her senior year, as Jessica was speeding towards her early action deadlines, she discovered that one of her teachers hadn't submitted her recommendation letter yet. "That was really infuriating," she told me, "because I feel like now it's, like, rushed. And I feel like I had this conversation months ago, which is kind of disappointing, because I do have lots of options."

In contrast, Jessica felt confident that her counselor was going to be able to write a strong letter of recommendation for her. She had filled out a form at the beginning of the year for him with some details about herself for the recommendation; "what do you do outside of school? What might you want to look into? What's your dynamic? Stuff like that," she told me. They had also met so many times throughout the application process that she felt like he had gotten to know her well and that he would have all of the information he needed.

Completing the Common Application

Jessica completed almost the entire Common Application form, including the essay, in only about two weeks. She described how she tried to focus her application in such a way that it would call attention to her strengths in extracurricular activities and minimize attention to her grades, which she felt were not strong enough. "I did plenty outside, I've got to veer their focus over, look at what I do on the side," she told me. "Maybe ignore the fact that I got a C in that class, but look at this! Oh yeah, I didn't take any fancy math courses, but look at how great of a person I am."

Partially due to her rapid submission process, Jessica needed significant support in completing her application. Filling out the demographic information at the beginning wasn't difficult, but she needed the support of her counselor to get started. "I literally sat with my guidance counselor and filled in, legal name, you know what I mean?" she explained, "name, gender, GPA, [name of high school]." Jessica also shared that filling out the demographic portion of the application was somewhat stressful, because she was concerned that she wasn't "different enough" to stand out in the applicant pool. As we talked about the identity labels that are included in the demographic portion of the

Common Application, it struck me for the first time that there was not a place to self-identify her disability status. It reminded me of Davis's (2015) argument that disability is rarely counted as diversity, and I wondered if being able to self-identify as disabled would have made her feel like she stood out more, or if she would even have chosen to self-identify in that way.

When she reached the high school information portion of the application, her counselor provided her with the details that she needed about class size, school CEEB code, type of GPA, and how to answer for the question about her class rank. She knew she had received some of this information in a hand-out at one point, but she hadn't kept it. "There was like eight pieces of paper, there was so much paper," she told me, "and I was like, I don't even know where this was… I don't remember this." Jessica also found the section where she had to fill in her current courses to be time-consuming, since she had to use her school's grading software to list each course exactly as it was categorized by her school. Luckily, her counselor was able to coach her through how to do this.

Jessica worked on the activities and awards section of the application during our second meeting together. She had started the section with her counselor prior to our meeting, and she was anxious to finish it. She told me that leaving parts of the application unfinished was "another issue with the college process, because you can't do it all at once," and that made her anxiety spike. She had made a list of her activities based on her resume, and during our meeting she was debating which ones to include and how to describe each of them. Having a resume, which she had created in her senior capstone course, was extremely helpful for her because she could just copy and paste much of the

information into her application. "That was saving me actually a lot more than I thought," she told me.

Although she felt lucky that she had many activities from which to choose, as compared to some of her friends who were scrambling to come up with ten activities, it was difficult for Jessica to decide what to include in this section. She felt that some of her activities were too similar, and she was trying to figure out which activities would be "more impressive" to an admissions committee. She definitely wanted to include her participation in Unified Sports and her other volunteer work with disabled students, as well as her internship, her mentoring positions, and her participation in academic decathlon. After she debated the merits of several of her other activities, which included sports, volunteer work, and babysitting, I asked her which of these remaining activities was the most significant to her. She decided to include field hockey, even though she had only played during her first year of high school. "Despite doing it before, it was a huge part of my life before my surgery," she told me, "so it's not my fault I couldn't do it. So I feel like that clarifies a little bit in my essay of why I stopped." As she filled in the descriptions for each activity in the application form, it took her some time to try to figure out how many hours per week and weeks per year she participated in each activity. She paused in the midst of her calculations to say, "oh my gosh, it's like draining!" She also spent a lot of time trying to re-word her descriptions in order to get them to fit into the allotted space.

After writing and rewriting her activity descriptions until they satisfied her, Jessica wasn't in the mood to put them in rank order. "They're gonna see all of them," she told me, so she didn't feel like it mattered too much – unless I thought that the

admissions offices were going to really look closely at that part. I told her I didn't think it was something she needed to stress over too much, and that she could always come back to it later. It took her about 45 minutes to fill in all of the information in the activities section. After she completed it, Jessica told me, "I need to now highlight or cross off something, or I feel very, very bad." She also felt a strong urge to re-write her list, but she resisted doing so, she said, because we only had a limited time. "I typically would rewrite this about four times until it is to my liking," she told me, "which is really hard in school." She described this compulsion as "an OCD-thing," and it sounded like this was an issue for her with other parts of the application as well. It was hard for her to move on until she thought the section she was working on was perfect.

For the awards section, Jessica initially wasn't sure what exactly she should write. There were only five spaces for honors and awards, and she didn't know if things like being elected to student government or being nominated for a school award were appropriate to include. One of her challenges in choosing between her options was that she was trying to show that she had honors across her high school career, not just in her senior year. She told me, "I just am worried that they're gonna say, 'oh, so she did everything her last year of high school to look good on her college application.'" I tried to assure her that the nature of many high school and community awards, other than honor roll, were that they typically were given to older students. She ended up including her semesters on the honor roll, a Daughter's of the American Revolution citizenship award nomination, and awards she had won through academic decathlon. This section only ended up taking about five minutes for her to complete once she felt like she had a

grasp of what she should include, and it was the last part of her application that I was able to watch her work on.

While Jessica felt that many of the pieces of the application weren't too difficult to complete once she found the motivation to get started, the essay was a major challenge. "The essay was the biggest hurdle I went through," she told me, and she ended up writing it only a few days before her applications were due. I asked her if she had written one in English class in junior year, and she explained to me that she had written an essay, but "it was bleh. And I didn't put the energy into making it not bleh." Part of her challenge, she explained, was that she hated narrative writing and writing about herself. "I literally started my essay and I was like [gagging sounds]," she told me. She also felt like the context of her junior year English class was not conducive to her success. "I'd written it junior year, but I'd written one that really wasn't that deep," she shared:

> and I had a substitute teacher, they barely helped it, like you know what I mean? I just felt like, this isn't what I'm going to submit. Maybe, I think it would have been, I think a lot of people were like, "Oh, didn't you write it in school?" I guess a lot of kids benefited from that because they wrote it and they re-edited it, but I just didn't. Again, I think part of that was the motivation piece.

She also thought that part of the reason she lacked the motivation to start the essay was that she felt like she had a lot of good topics to write about, and that it would be easy to write her essay when she felt like doing it. She told me, half-jokingly:

> My friends were like, 'Jessica, you're so damaged, you have so many good things to write about!' I'm like, 'thanks guys!'… I'm like, 'I know. Enjoy writing about

sandcastles, ladies! I've got life-threatening ones over here!' So it was kind of a
joke that I was like, I've so much I'll write about, it's fine.

This notion that her friends considered her disability and experiences with pain as a
strength in the college essay writing process interested me, and it made me think about
the many college essays I had read that were framed around narratives of pain. As Jessica
thought more deeply about the college essay over time, she also began to question
whether this was the best way to frame her essay. "I think there's a lot of misconceptions
about the essay," she told me in one of our later meetings. "I think a lot of times people
do like a sob story."

When it finally came time to sit down and write her essay, she had thought about
this quite a bit, and she didn't want to write an essay that would be construed as a "sob
story." She shared with me:

> [my friends] joke that like I had so many things happen, like, that were very not
> typical, that like they were like, "Jessica can just pick out of a hat of what she
> wants. She's got spinal surgery, she's got the Tourette's." It was kind of funny. I
> did have a lot, but I was noticing that every time I asked someone, what are you
> writing your essay on? "Oh, when I had eye surgery in the fourth grade." I was
> like, ok. What are you writing your essay on? "Oh, when my grandma died." And
> not that, that sounds awful that I'm saying that, but I was like, I'm sensing a
> pattern here. And it was like, "when I tore my ACL." It was really sob stories…
> So I was like, yes, I could write about emergency spinal surgery. So? Like, I just
> felt like that was the pattern, and I was like, everyone's writing this kind of sob
> story. And everyone, the first thing everyone said was, "well, you're writing about

your back, right?" And I was like, what did I learn from my back? I learned that learning to walk again sucks. I learned that excruciating pain can come from emergency surgery. I learned that the fear of missing out while my entire grade is moving on and I'm not. All I learned from that experience was that that sucked. I never want to do that again. You know what I mean? That was the honest opinion. I was like, yes, okay, fine. I feel stronger. But honestly, no, that was a terrible experience. I didn't enjoy that. I didn't come out, I came out a stronger person because of that adversity that I overcame, but I didn't come out because of my outlook on things. It was the same. It was just like geez, I don't ever want to do that again. So I tried to think of a story that I, or you know, something to share with admissions that would be different other than just, I was sad and I got better, because I think that's what I was hearing a lot of.

She wondered how many essays admissions officers would read about minor injuries or managing anxiety, topics which she felt were common among her peers and which did little to exhibit students' resilience or growth. "It's kind of like, what did you learn from a broken thumb?" she told me. Jessica ultimately choose not to write about any of her personal challenges, but instead chose to write an essay about her friendship with a boy with intellectual disabilities, and how the relationship had changed her. "I thought that that was a really good story, as much as it, it definitely wasn't very well-written," she told me, "but I think that it was such an important story to me that, if you think about the logic behind it, I thought it was valid enough."

Similar to the other parts of the application, Jessica found she had difficulty motivating herself to get started on her essay, and because her application timeline was

suddenly shortened when she decided to submit for the early action deadlines, her parents

hired a tutor to help her work on her essay. "I just kept putting it off and putting it off and

putting it off, and I literally wrote it the week before with my tutor," she shared:

> Which, that was, I feel like I would have been so much less stressed if I had just
>
> done that before. But I also think I would have gone back, knowing myself, and
>
> would have critiqued it a million times before it was just awful… [Although] I'd
>
> rather have been like critiquing it for a month than doing it a few weeks before,
>
> that was definitely a big struggle.

She felt like there was no ideal scenario for writing her essay, and she was just glad that it

was done. Despite writing her essay at the last minute, Jessica didn't use the prompts

from the Common Application as a guideline for her writing process. "I did not look at

any of the prompts before," she told me. "I wrote it and then, honestly, it was very easy to

tangle into one of them. If you look at them, they're all very broad."

When Jessica reached the final questions on the Common Application and the

supplemental school-specific questions, she felt like she was in the home stretch. "By that

point, I felt like it was easy," she told me. "I felt like I had filled out the entire Common

App, all I needed now was to give, like, they were little blurbs." Her counselor had

advised her not to answer the supplemental question about the impact of COVID-19; she

was told, "unless you have something other than, 'I survived COVID-19,' you really

shouldn't write about that." Her counselor helped her review her application before

submitting, and helped her fill in a section about being on the academic honor roll, which

she had initially missed. Then, she was ready to submit – and managed to meet all of her

early action deadlines.

After she submitted her first five applications with early action deadlines in November, she decided to add a few more colleges to her application list. She had initially applied to one large, out-of-state public school and decided to add another out-of-state public school to her list because she had liked it on her tour and she felt like it was a little smaller than the other public school. She had missed the early action deadline for this school by the time she decided to apply, so she submitted her application very early for the regular decision deadline in February. She also added two small, private schools in an urban area to her list because they offered at least one of her potential majors. Her final application was to a small, private university in a major metropolitan area. Jessica had little interest in this school, but she figured she would submit an application because it was free to do so and the school offered both forensics and special education as majors.

Jessica described to me how easy it was to submit applications to a large number of schools once she had completed the main parts of the Common Application. Although the fees to apply to schools were inconvenient, she found that many times she could get the fee waived. She knew she would have to answer additional school-specific questions for each college she added, but she found those to be easy. "Those are literally, do you plan to live on campus? Do you have a criminal record? All the things, I was just dropping down a bar. Do any of our programs interest you? You know what I mean?" she explained. "It was super easy."

We also shared a laugh as she described to me that she had the "ultimate scare" in the college application process – she accidentally submitted an application for one school with a description of how much she wanted to go to another school. However, it was only

funny for her because she had been admitted into the school when she shared the story. At the time she submitted, she was mortified and immediately emailed the admissions counselor to try to explain her mistake. The admission counselor for the school responded that it happens all the time, and Jessica received her admission notification for that school only a few days later.

When I asked Jessica if she felt relieved that the process was over, she said yes and no. "I feel relieved that it's like okay, they're, they're out. They're out of my hands anymore," she told me.

I think the only fear I have now, is less of like, oh where do I submit and where do I go, and more of, is there anywhere else? Is there anywhere else? Am I missing anything? Should I change that? I try not to think like that because it's like, it's not going to do any good.

She hoped that her extracurricular activities, her essay, and her recommendations would make up for what she felt was a less adequate academic profile. Ultimately, she was just glad to be done with what had felt like a long process. She told me:

I felt like one of the things that was really exhausting with this process was it was, alright, you've done your Naviance, check. Okay, now you need to check off this. It was almost like a never-ending cycle. And it's just now a year later that I feel like, oh my gosh, things are actually happening, like I'm actually getting results and things are actually becoming a reality. Which is frightening, but also I just don't feel like I'm like chasing this ball.

Contemplating Financial Aid

Since Jessica's expedited application process was motivated by the hopes of finding additional financial aid, she turned her attention to understanding the financial aid process once her applications were submitted. During our meeting in December, Jessica explained to me that some schools might provide additional scholarship money or were more likely to provide merit-based aid if you applied for the early action deadlines. "Technically, it's not written in words that that's true," she told me, "but it's true for some people in some cases." She wanted to do everything possible to maximize her chances of receiving financial aid, especially since she had two younger siblings who would also need her parents' financial support to go to college. Her mom was also invested in the financial aid process, and had already submitted the FAFSA for federal financial aid before Jessica had even begun her applications.

Jessica was planning to pursue every available scholarship opportunity, but the scholarship processes facilitated through her school were not open for applications until February. When these processes opened, Jessica was able to use a type of matching software to search for scholarships for which she was eligible. "There's a list of things," she told me, "oh, get 1,000 bucks here if you write this, you know, 5,000 bucks if you can show this." She felt like a lot of students might not take advantage of these scholarship opportunities because they required more work, but she felt that the work was worth it if she was able to gain more financial assistance. This process also seemed to happen quickly, and by March, she was completely finished.

Reflections on the Application

Starting the Common Application form was one of the biggest challenges for Jessica in her application process. "The more difficult part was opening that Common App," she reflected:

> And I swear by it, I think that was the most difficult part. And I think that I've seen friends that, I literally went over their houses and I, we opened the Common App together and like, we did it together, because the hardest part was getting that down.

Applying to college felt like such an unknown, overwhelming process that she found it hard to motivate herself to take these first steps. Once she began, she felt like the other challenges in completing the application were less intimidating, although finding the motivation to write her essay was also a major obstacle for her.

Jessica also found it difficult to navigate the huge amount of college-related information that she received in her junior and senior year. Since the idea of college was already overwhelming to her, she shut down when she felt like the flow of information was unmanageable. Then, when she was finally ready to proceed with her application process, she did not have a clear idea of how to do so. "Half of it was like understanding, like, what do I need to do? And you know, in stone, just like this is what you need to do, this is how you need to get it done," she recalled. "I think there was a lot of information that I was missing." Breaking the application down into smaller, more distinct pieces was helpful for her. "I think I would just try to like, chunk it in a way that wasn't so overwhelming," she told me. "And just look at, half of it is filling out a doctor's form, half of it is just my age, my GPA."

Additionally, although completing applications was stressful at the time, Jessica felt that submitting her applications for the early action deadlines was 'life-saving' for her, because she found out that she was admitted to schools as early as November and then didn't have to worry about not being admitted anywhere. This was especially important for her, since initially she was concerned that she wouldn't get into any colleges because she felt that her grades and standardized test scores were not good enough. She selected schools for her shortlist based on where she thought she had the best chance of admission, and ultimately she was admitted to almost all of these schools. Upon reflection, Jessica realized that her application process had been largely shaped by her feelings of low self-worth, based on her past school experiences, and her perceptions of the college process as hyper-competitive:

> I think I was so hard on myself, too. I think that I cannot blame all of that on my, my surroundings because at home, I had nothing but support from home, from family, from friends, from teachers. So it's not fair to say that, oh, it was the environment… that's what the college process was. It was kind of a very competitive type thing, kind of a race of who can do this, who can do that. And I think part of it was just my head saying that like, you're not, you're not worthy enough, you're not good enough. Like high school was hard. If you, if high school is hard for you, how do you think college is gonna go? You know what I mean?

Jessica also shared that, in some ways, being admitted to colleges was very validating for her:

> I think it also shed a positive light though, too, because I swear I thought I was a terrible student. When junior year we started thinking about this, I was like, oh

my goodness. Are you kidding me? I looked at my SAT scores, which mind you

were absolutely embarrassing, I had far below what the average was, it was

terrible… And I was like, oh my gosh, are you kidding me? This is terrible. But in

reality, the grand scheme of things, I probably could have applied to more

competitive schools too and got in. I think that it's, it was, I was so down on

myself about it, but that kind of was half the battle. Because I was like, you didn't

take any APs. You took one honors and barely got by. It was a lot of that self-talk.

Although her negative self-perception was a large part of the equation, Jessica felt

like her high school environment also played a role in her anxiety about getting into

college. Given that her high school was a relatively well-resourced school in a

predominantly white, middle-class town, I was not surprised to hear her describe the

pressure she felt apply to selective schools. For example, she told me that her school had

a "senior page" where they would post the colleges to which each student had been

admitted. When she saw where other students were admitted, she felt like her college

choices weren't good enough.

I was like, geez, I suck. It was, you know, again it's the population I'm in…

everyone's deciding with these really competitive schools, because the reality is,

if you do get into those competitive schools, it's usually what you go with. But I

was like, I don't know how I feel about this.

Later in her senior year, as a mentor for first-year students in the special education

program, Jessica advised her mentees not to let themselves get caught up in the hype

around college acceptance rates. She told me that she tries to let them know that they can

still go to great schools, even if they don't take AP classes. "I think that that was, you

know, something that I wish I had heard more," she shared. "Because I heard a lot of, "wherever you go, it's going to be great," and not, you know, "you have opportunity, [even though] you're not top of your class." Her other piece of advice for students who receive special education services was to take advantage of every available support resource for getting the college application done. "Go to the guidance counselor, go to your social worker, go to a teacher and sit there for an hour and just get it done," she said.

> Because it is so hard to do it by yourself, like that is so stressful to even open up the Common App and be like, I'm going to do this, is so hard. So take advantage of those, like more than any time that you want to take advantage of that, kind of what tools you have from your IEPs, because yeah, that is absolutely when you should do it.

> Jessica's reflection on the application process was also a reminder to me of how this process happens in the midst of so many other things that are happening in students' lives. "It's hard, and it takes a lot of energy to play the game," she told me. The steps of preparing for and then completing the application felt overwhelming and exhausting for her in part because she was trying to manage them on top of her regular school work, her jobs, her volunteer work, and her social life:

> I was like, I'm working four days a week. I don't even see my friends. I have three English essays to write. I was like, I just got dumped, and I was like, hello? Can I like focus on my, you know what I mean? And I felt like I was taking an extra four course loads just to apply to something that was kind of expected of me.

Reflections on Special Education

Jessica's experiences with receiving special education services, much like her overall experiences of school, were mixed. She felt that the services she received helped her to be more successful in the classroom, and that having an IEP helped her to become more aware of her strengths and weaknesses. Her IEP also helped her to recognize additional resources that were available to her in school, such as working with a social worker, that she would not have known to seek out otherwise. At the same time, she often felt stigmatized by receiving special education services, especially pull-out services that required her to leave the general education classroom. She described this experience in her middle-school classroom:

> so they would have groups you'd be sitting in and they would say, "alright, pull-out math," or "pull-out English." And the group of the same four of us in the class would walk out. That progressed to more just during tests, it was just known. You know, these, I can name them off the top of my head, there were six of us that every single time would walk out of our seats, which when you're in a test, you know what I mean? Which, in my head, everyone was like, "oh, Jessica is walking out." That probably did not go through their mind, but I mean, it would be visible.

She felt like the extra attention she received from teachers in the general education classroom made her stand out as well. In high school, the fact that she took a skills class instead of a second elective also differentiated her from her peers. While she felt like it was less stigmatizing in high school to be pulled out for services, she felt that it was still very visible.

When it was time to start preparing her for the transition to college, Jessica felt that her high school special education teachers had done an excellent job of helping her transition from a high level of support to more independence. She felt like she was appropriately supported throughout the process, and that she had been allowed to drive the decisions about what services to relinquish. Her teachers would provide her with options about which classes she could take and different academic supports that she could access, and then allowed her to decide what course of action to take. In this way, she was preparing to navigate the transition from special education services in high school to disability accommodations in college.

While Jessica received a variety of accommodations, she told me that learning about her disability was the single most valuable part of special education for her. When members of her support team explained her disability to her and made the connection between her disability and the accommodations she was receiving, it helped her to better understand her experiences in the classroom. This was not done by her teachers in school, but rather by external members of her special education support team, such as her therapist, her social worker, and her mom. She told me:

> That didn't come from any support inside. They taught me how to, okay, you have executive functioning, so this is what you need to do instead. But I was never told, like, to unpack… unpack what that means exactly. I was told, "Oh, you have tracking issues. So we're gonna just put this." I was told tools, "you're gonna put this under your paper so you can track it." But I didn't understand why I was doing that, or, you know, clinically what was happening. So that, no wonder I thought it was me, because I'm given all these tools, the kid next to me doesn't

have that. But I didn't understand why... When someone finally explained to me, clinically, what ADHD is, I was like blown away... And I wish so much that someone had sat down and told me, like, what it was, why I do these things, why I feel this way and maybe some of the things I feel because of it. I think that that was, that would have been so helpful, because, um, you know, I think that it's a tiptoe around, especially when the younger grades, I feel like it was like, "you're not getting extra, you, well, it's just like you're coming out of the classroom." No, it is extra support. But it's why there's that extra support.

"When I look back at special education," she concluded, "I had a, it was anger, because I didn't understand. And I didn't think it was fair."

Jessica felt that her experiences with school and special education had also impacted her college process in multiple ways. Her school experiences made her question whether she would be able to succeed in college and shaped how she thought about the college application process. Having an IEP added an additional layer of consideration to her process, she told me,

because initially, I was under the impression that just because I had that paper, I needed a school that would offer a lot of support. When in reality, I looked at the support I was getting right now, and kind of how I've taken it into my own hands, and it differs significantly.

When I asked Jessica if there was anything she would do differently if she could do the college process over again, she told me that a huge part of it would have been to give herself more affirmation that she was capable of going to college and being successful in school. She wished that there had been more people telling her that she was capable, and

that the school environment had made her feel more capable. "I just wished that certain messages were stressed to me more, she told me.

> And that sounds kind of simple, but I definitely feel that I had such a morphed kind of perception of college and college process… I wish there had been more voices that were like, 3.5 GPA is absolutely amazing. 3.2 is all right, it's not bad. I mean, 4.1 isn't what everyone has in this classroom. I genuinely believed that everyone had a 3.9 or 4.0 in my classes. I swore by it. I would have bet you money. I wish there were more reminders of that… Like I really was in an ok space to apply to college. That wasn't a completely bizarre thing for me to do.

In our last meeting, I asked Jessica what the word disability meant to her, and she said it was complicated. She explained to me:

> when I say I have a learning disability, it feels weird. I can't, um, I couldn't really tell you why. But it feels weird. And it feels like I'm almost taking a wrongful word and putting it on myself. Like if you were to call yourself a title that belonged to someone else… I feel like it takes away from someone who may struggle more than me.

As she talked through her understanding with me, it was clear that she was struggling to reconcile her experiences with disability and special education with her identity. "I think it relates to disadvantage for me," she described. "Why I feel I connect more to the word disadvantage than disability, I'm not entirely sure."

Since Jessica had been working towards her certification in ABA therapy over the course of her senior year, I also asked her if her experiences with special education had shaped the way she worked with disabled students. She recalled how she often felt

frustrated in school when it seemed that she couldn't understand something, and that she had felt discouraged by teachers who had taken a one-size-fits-all approach to learning. "It was kind of like, this is how you learn this. And if you don't, then I don't know what to tell you," she explained to me. In contrast, she felt like she would never say something like that to a student, and that she always tried her best to individualize her approach to working with each of her clients.

While she was still unsure if she would pursue special education as a career field or even as a major in college, at the moment she felt like her work as an ABA therapist was something that she found to be rewarding. "I'm driven by just doing something for others," she told me, "and I feel like I do something for others here."

Concluding Thoughts

Out of the three students who participated in my research, Jessica changed the most over the course of our time together and over the course of her college process. In the deciding phase, she began by thinking that she wasn't college material, and by the end of our time together she was describing her academic record as "pretty solid." When she first started exploring colleges, she described feeling terror and being completely overwhelmed to the point of physical and mental breakdown. By the time she was completing her applications, she was comfortably and enjoyably critiquing her tour experiences. While she was in the midst of the application process, she felt intensely stressed and anxious that she wouldn't be admitted to any schools, but after receiving her admissions decisions, she realized that she could have applied to more selective schools and that she likely would have been admitted. These changes reminded me that when you are living a story "in the midst," it's hard to imagine the ending. Once you know the

ending of a particular story, it's hard to imagine how you missed the clues that

foreshadowed the ending along the way.

Jessica told me that she always thought applying to college would be like

something you'd see in a movie. In her mind she was supposed to find a school that was

perfect for her and that she couldn't wait to attend, and she had worried that there was

something wrong with the fact that she didn't feel strongly about any of the schools on

her shortlist. "I thought I had to have this one school that I was, you know, waiting,

counting the seconds to," she told me. "And I think that, in reality, that just wasn't my

process. I was like, I have great options here. But I think I was undermining those options

because I thought I should feel a certain way." As her college process unfolded over time,

she made peace with the fact that she wasn't going to have this type of experience:

> I was like, you know what, hey, you don't have a dream school. But one of the, all
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> of these schools that you're looking at have like promising futures. They, you're
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> going to figure it out… I was like, okay, these are my opportunities and I should,
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> you know, I kind of was like, I have to start thinking positively about that. And
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> the fact that, no, it's not a miracle. Actually, it's kind of pretty expected that I got
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> into these. It's kind of pretty expected that I can go to any one of these, you know
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> what I mean? And that's, that's good.

In retrospect, Jessica realized that college had always been possible for her.

However, her lived experiences of struggling in the classroom conflicted with her idea of

a "college-material" student, and it took her a long time to begin to reconcile these. She

told me, upon reflection:

College to me was a[n] attainable reality, due to my situation, my financial

situation, due to my, you know, the privilege that I have, you know, with my

parents. I had a lot of, I was able, if I wanted to go to college, I would have been

able to go. I can go. But I think at the same time, yes, I wasn't worried about how

I would pay for college, having something to eat at college, but I was, I definitely

saw college as something that was made for the 4.0 [GPA], AP student. And I

cannot say that enough… I guess I just saw that as, you go to college when you

have that. If you're on an IEP, if you have a 3.4 [GPA], if you're barely getting

your assignments in but when you do, it takes ten times as long – maybe you

should look into something else. Because aim for Ivy, settle for state. And you're

just the settle type of person, I guess. That's what I repeated I think in my head,

because I genuinely did not see it… I definitely think that that was an outlook I

had for a very long time. And I think it, I think it did a lot of damage. It did do a

lot of damage, because it took me years to realize, oh my gosh, I can have like a

really great college experience. I can be on an IEP, I can have anxiety, I can have

ADHD, I can have depression, I can, you know what I mean? And I don't have to

take AP classes. I think that was really hard to grasp onto.

When Jessica and I met for the last time, she still felt that going to college was a

big decision, but it was a decision that no longer carried so much weight for her. In many

ways she had begun to view college as only one small part of her future, and she had

realized that the decision of where to go to college was neither final nor necessarily

defining of what she could become. "You know, I really do not have to know exactly

what I have to do, and I can just kind of try it out," she told me at one point.

Sounds like such a big decision, going to college, moving out. But you know, you look at people changing their majors four times. People transfer, people go back home, people become commuters and then live on campus, like there are changes that can be made. It's not in stone.

As I reflected on our final conversation, I thought back to our first meetings when she had told me, "for a while, I didn't want to go to college." Now, thinking about the college-bound young woman she had become, I couldn't help but feel that she had come a great distance from where she had started – and that she still had a great distance to go.

CHAPTER SIX: CORE

Meeting Core

Corazon – Core for short – was the last of my three students to sign on to my research, and he did not join the project until the second semester of his senior year. As a result, Core and I only had two research meetings together. During our first meeting, Core started, completed, and submitted his application to the only college that he was applying to, a local community college. During our second meeting, Core had been up late the previous evening and was not in an especially talkative mood, so our conversation was less than 30 minutes long. Thus, while narrative inquiry suggests that all research stories can only share a partial view of experience, Core's story as shared here is truly the most incomplete.

Despite not meeting Core officially until January, I had actually encountered him two times prior to our first meeting. I first encountered Core on one of my early trips to Middletown High, when I was meeting with a school administrator. I was waiting in the main office, which was empty while the secretary went to let the administrator know that I had arrived, and Core walked in. He ambled around for a moment and made a casual comment to me, and then I was called off to my meeting so I politely responded and left. At the time I had no idea who he was, and I thought of this brief exchange as just an amusing encounter with a typical high school student.

Our paths crossed again when I attended a field trip organized by MHS to a local community college in mid-October. Core was one of the attendees, and I recognized him from our earlier encounter but didn't have a chance to speak to him during the visit, which was highly structured by the admissions officer. At that point I knew Core by

name, and his teacher had spoken to him about the research project, so I knew that he was

a potential participant. I also knew that, in a way, I was being evaluated on that field trip

while Core decided whether or not he wanted to work with me. We corresponded on and

off after that for several months before Core signed up, and we finally met for the first

time on an afternoon in January in a classroom in the learning center at his high school.

It took some time for Core to warm up to me, but he was very open and

communicative about his disability from the start. Prior to our first meeting, Core sent me

a detailed email explaining what he would need during our interviews to feel

comfortable. He explained that he might not make eye contact because he didn't really

know me, and that he might need to play a game on his phone or draw in order to keep

his hands busy, activities that helped him with his ADHD. He assured me that he would

be listening the whole time, regardless of what else he might be doing. I responded to

assure him that whatever he needed to do in order to be comfortable was fine with me. I

was very impressed with his self-awareness and self-advocacy in this setting, and I truly

appreciated him taking the time to prepare me for our meeting. When we were finally

face-to-face, Core did become more comfortable with me after the first half of our

meeting, and by the end he was joking with me and telling me anecdotes about his pets

and his teachers. However, Core preferred not to have our conversations recorded, so the

story that I recount here is constructed from my notes during our meetings and my

memory.

I did not learn as much about Core's college process as I did about the other

students with whom I worked, and so it is much more difficult for me to tell his story of

college choice. However, I did learn that he was a talented artist, that he deeply loved and

cared for animals, and that he had a strong relationship with at least one of his dads, who was a big support to him in thinking about his future and whom I met during the research consent process. I also learned that Core was the youngest of three children in his family, that he had been adopted by his dads, and that he identified as transgender. Core was the only one of my student participants who elected to select his own pseudonym for his research story, and he chose the name Corazon based on an animal character from a television show that he enjoyed. Since he went by a nickname in person, I asked if I could call him "Core" for his research nickname, and he agreed that it was perfect.

School Experiences

Core had both positive and negative feelings about school. He enjoyed many of his classes, especially the classes where he was able to be creative. When I first met with Core in January, the second semester of the academic year had just begun, and he told me about how he was enjoying learning to run a business in his Business and Management class that had just started. He had also loved the creative writing class that he had taken in his first semester of senior year, but he decided not to take advanced creative writing in the second semester because he thought it would involve too much reading, which he didn't enjoy. The advanced section of the course also conflicted with his senior privilege period at the end of the day, which was his free period, and he didn't want to lose that time. Core's favorite subject in school was art, and he had just started a digital photography course that he thought he would enjoy. He described taking an art class that was related to engineering in his first semester, and he had really liked it because he spent most of his time working on art projects of his own design. He also described this course as being very relaxed, and he told me that sometimes he just hung out and did things on

his phone during that period. He had also enjoyed his gym class in the first semester. Core's least favorite subject was English, and he thought it was unfair that he had to take an English class every semester. This made sense to me, since he admitted that he didn't like reading.

Although he enjoyed many of his classes, Core described academic work as stressful and difficult. He told me that school work ruined his life, and he hated doing it. His ADHD made it difficult for him to focus on completing academic work, and he often received extensions on assignments as one of his special education accommodations. This was one of his most helpful accommodations, because he felt like extensions took some of the pressure off him to complete assignments and made the process less stressful. When I asked him to tell me more about his experiences with special education, he said that it was really helpful for him. He received some of his services through a specialized program at his high school that is described on the school's website as providing a "therapeutic approach to educational experiences," and this program allowed him to complete some of his class work outside of the classroom in a separate, dedicated location. Core told me he enjoyed being able to go to the space provided by this program because he felt he could just relax and get work done there. By his senior year of high school, he told me he wasn't really meeting regularly with a special education teacher but that he was able to check in with a teacher as needed. Core also told me that he had recently been diagnosed with autism, which had initially surprised him but which made more sense to him by the time we met in January.

Core's teachers and his relationships with them were by far the best thing about high school for him. He told me that he thought high school would be great if he could

just come every day and hang out with his teachers without the pressure of completing school work. I asked him to tell me more about some of his favorite teachers, and he described two teachers who he felt were especially helpful and caring. He told me that his favorite teacher was really laid back, but that he would regularly check in with Core to see if he needed any help with his class work. Core felt like this teacher really cared about him and was always willing to provide extra support or to give him an extension if he was struggling. Core also told me that he felt like all of his teachers had provided him great support throughout high school and during his college choice process. Initially he felt sad about graduating from high school because he was going to miss his teachers so much, but he realized that he could come back and visit them often, which he intended to do. It was clear from the way that Core spoke about his teachers that these educators had made a strong impression on him and had really positively impacted his life.

Outside of school, Core loved to create art and spend time with his pets. Core loved animals, and he showed me pictures and videos of his dogs and pet chickens. He described a recent trip he had taken with his dad to a nearby wolf preserve and how much he had enjoyed it, and he told me that he had become completely fascinated with wolves. After their trip together, Core told his dad that he might want to work at the wolf preserve, but his dad said that it would be more of a hobby rather than a real job. Core had begun painting and sculpting wolves in his art, and he showed me pictures of some of the recent pieces he had completed, which I thought were quite impressive.

Core also worked about 11 hours a week at a local store, which he enjoyed. He really liked his boss, and he liked that there were a variety of different tasks he could work on at the store so that he didn't feel bored. Core told me that at his previous job his

boss had been really unkind to him, and he was frequently assigned to tasks that he had to do alone, like stocking the produce section, which was lonely. His current job was much better, and he even volunteered to pick up extra shifts when he could because he wanted to help his boss out.

Core wasn't sure if he had a transition plan in place for postsecondary planning, but he told me that he had been meeting with people at school to talk about college. I knew that Core had been working with the transition coordinator at Middletown High over the course of the school year, and that he had been enrolled in a seminar course in the fall of his senior year that was specifically designed to prepare students who received special education services for their postsecondary transition. However, Core did not mention these resources over the course of our conversations.

Deciding, Exploring, Selecting

Since Core strongly disliked school work, it was not surprising to me that Core was not excited about going to college. When we first met, he told me that he was only applying to colleges because his dad said that he had to go to college or to a trade school after high school. In our second conversation, I learned that Core had two older brothers, one of whom had completed college and worked in a laboratory. Core told me that he was always arguing with this older brother, but that he felt much closer to his other older brother, who had not completed college because he had been arrested at some point in the past. From Core's description, it sounded like his second brother had started college but had been unable to finish due to his criminal record, and at the time we met, this brother was working in a restaurant in an urban area and living in transitional housing. I

wondered if this family history was at all related to the reason Core's dad was encouraging him to pursue college as a postsecondary option.

When I asked Core what he was interested in doing after high school, he told me that he wanted to be a police officer because he wanted to help people. Core felt that becoming a police officer would be a way for him to 'save the world a bit.' He had been talking to the school resource officer about what his job was like, and had asked the resource officer if he could go on patrol with him sometime. Core's dad said he could go on patrol with this officer, but Core hadn't heard back yet from the school resource officer about whether this was possible. I asked Core whether he needed any college or specific training in order to be a police officer, but he wasn't sure so we spent some time using our phones to look up the requirements for employment in the police force. Core found some information on a website for a local police station that suggested that college was encouraged but not required for becoming a police officer, which seemed fine to him since he was planning to apply to college anyway. Based on the information he read to me from the website, I suggested that maybe he could take some criminal justice courses at college while also potentially taking some art classes, since his art classes were some of his favorite at high school. Core thought that could be a good plan for him, and said he would think about it.

Although Core was interested in becoming a police officer, he told me that his dad was concerned that law enforcement would be a difficult career field for him because of his disabilities. Core told me that his dad suggested that he take courses to become a veterinary technician, since he loved animals. He thought that might be interesting, but he knew that vet technicians had to euthanize animals as part of the job, and he didn't think

he could ever do that because he loved animals too much. Core also said that he tends to get anxious about things, and he thought his anxiety might make that job hard for him. It was clear from our conversations that Core was close with his dad, and that despite their different opinions about what Core might do with his future, his dad was a huge support to him in thinking about what he would do after high school.

Core only intended to apply to one college – the local community college that we had toured on his school field trip. This was the only college that Core had visited, which was the main reason he had chosen to apply to it. He said that it seemed alright to him on the tour, and he liked that this college had a football team because he enjoyed football. He also liked that it wasn't far from where he lived, although he mentioned that his dad was thinking about retiring soon and moving to another state, which worried him. He wasn't sure what he would do about college if his parents moved away.

We had planned to work on his application during our first meeting, so after about 30 minutes of conversation, I asked him if he wanted to take a look at the application. While he had not given the application process much prior thought or taken any preparatory steps toward applying, Core finished and submitted his community college application during the course of our meeting together. It took him less than 20 minutes to do so.

Applying

As Core was setting up his computer to work on his application, he asked me a question about the Common Application. I was surprised by his question, and asked him whether he needed to submit the Common Application for the community college that he had chosen. I mentioned that I had thought that most community colleges had their own

application, and Core seemed surprised by my response. He wasn't sure if this college

had its own application, so I suggested we look at the admissions information page on the

college's website in order to find out.

When we pulled up the college's website, the first thing Core wanted to look at

was the cost of attendance; he was very concerned about whether he would be able to

afford college. Core knew that his dad wanted to retire soon, and he was worried that

money would be tight. The college had a link to a net price calculator, so I suggested we

pull that up. Core started answering the questions for the net price calculator quickly, but

was unsure of what to put for the number of people in his household or for his household

income. I explained that people in the household was usually parents and siblings, or

anyone else for whom his dad was financially responsible. He asked me if he could call

his dad about the household income, so he pulled out his phone and called his dad at

work. His dad gave him the information, said hello to me, and mentioned that Core was

also eligible for a state grant program for adopted children. I suggested Core ask his

college counselor to provide him more information on the grant program, as I was unsure

of what type of application it would require. After we finished speaking to his dad, Core

submitted the information in the net price calculator and received his estimated cost of

attendance, which was several thousand dollars. He was worried about the cost, and he

told me he wasn't sure how his family would afford it. I talked him through what some of

the estimated expenses included, and explained how he could make choices such as living

at home to lower his cost of attendance. Later, while doing some internet research in

order to send him information about the grant program for adopted children, I found out

that Core's tuition would likely be waived completely if he was approved for the state

grant. I sent him this information as a follow up to our conversation, but never heard back about whether he had looked into it further.

After completing the net price calculation, Core pulled up the application form on the website and was surprised to see that he did not need to fill out the Common Application in order to apply. I had never looked at a community college application in depth, so I was learning alongside Core as he completed it.

There were not very many questions on the application, and they were primarily questions that collected demographic information. However, there were several questions that were challenging for Core, including the very first question. I imagine for most students that it is second nature to write their name in the first space on their application, but for Core it was not so simple. He asked me if he needed to write his birth name, which he referred to as his 'dead name,' on the application. I told him that the college would want his legal name on his application, and that if he hadn't legally changed his birth name, then that was what they would want him to write in the first space. We saw that there was a place farther down on the application to write his chosen name, but Core was frustrated that he had to use his old name at all. I had not really thought about this aspect of the application before, and I wondered how applications could be revised to be more sensitive to this issue for transgender students. Logistically, from an administrative perspective, I understood why they needed this information. However, I also wondered if there was a way to frame the application to be more affirming for transgender individuals who preferred their chosen name.

Core moved quickly through the other demographic questions until he reached the question about how he would prove state residency. We discussed the options listed on

the application, most of which Core did not have available to him, and finally settled on a

pay stub from his after school job and a tax return as possible proof of residency. I did

not bring it up again, but I thought to myself that these documents also probably used

Core's birth name rather than his chosen name. I also thought it was lucky that Core had

a part-time job at a local store, because he told me that he didn't have a driver's license or

any of the other identification documents that were listed as options in the application.

The final portion of the application asked Core to choose a program in which to

enroll, and when he chose 'undecided,' the application automatically populated 'liberal

arts.' I explained to him that liberal arts was something of a catch-all category, and that it

meant that he would take a little bit of everything. Core said that sounded alright to him,

although we didn't talk in depth about exactly what course he might need to take to meet

the liberal arts requirements, which would most certainly include some English classes.

Core quickly went through all of the verification check boxes on the final page of the

application, and then admitted to me that he was nervous to submit, but went ahead and

hit the 'submit' button anyway. He breathed a sigh of relief, and I told him I was

surprised at how short the application had been and how quickly he had gone through the

whole process. Core reflected that he was also surprised, but he was glad that it hadn't

taken very long and relieved to be finished.

The community college application that Core filled out did not ask for

information about his extracurricular activities and did not require any teacher

recommendations nor an essay. I asked Core if he had taken any standardized college

admissions tests in preparation for college applications, and he told me that he had taken

the PSATs because everyone at his high school took them. However, he was glad that his

dad hadn't made him take the SATs, and since test scores weren't required for his community college application, this didn't particularly affect his process in any way.

Reflections

After Core submitted his application, we spent some time looking through the course catalog for the community college to which he applied so that he could get an idea of what classes he might take in the fall. He wanted to look at art courses first, so I showed him where he could go on the website to search for courses by discipline. When he saw the list of art courses, he was surprised to see that most of them were scheduled for three hour periods, which he thought was too long to be in one class. I had minored in art in college, so I shared with him my experience of studio art classes and explained that usually the class was long because students spent the vast majority of that time working on their art. Core was relieved, and he told me that it sounded wonderful to have a class like that. It reminded me that it's hard to understand how different the college experience can be when students are still fully immersed in living their high school experiences.

Core was admitted to the community college to which he applied only a few weeks after submitting his application. While he didn't feel any more excited about attending college after being admitted, he also wasn't really worried about it. He mainly felt glad that the college application process was over, because thinking about applying to college had been stressful for him. When I met with him for the second time, Core was planning to visit his community college again with his dad so that he could get a feel for what the school would be like on a regular day.

He told me he was thinking about taking automotive mechanic courses along with art courses when he enrolled at college; he didn't mention anything about his interest in police work during our second conversation.

Core knew that the transition to college might be stressful, but he also thought that maybe it would end up being fine. He offered to let me know how everything went for him in the future, in case I wanted to tell people that part of his story as well.

Concluding Thoughts

Core's college choice process as a whole was very different from the processes of my other two student participants. This was in large part because he was applying to a single community college rather than to multiple, four-year universities. He did not go through an extensive period of college exploration and selection, but rather toured one school, thought it was fine, and decided to apply there because he felt like he had to pursue either college or trade school. The application process itself took less than 20 minutes and did not require much information, nor did it require any external recommendations or an essay.

However, this is not to say that the college choice process was easy for Core. Core admitted to me that he had found it to be very stressful to think about college, and he had been anxious about completing his application. He also was unaware that he would not have to complete the Common Application for his community college, and was very relieved when he found out that it was not required. Though he was relieved about finishing the application process, he was still concerned about the financial aspects of college and seemed to be unsure about which academic program of study he would pursue once enrolled.

For Core, there were still many unknowns about college in the spring of his senior year, and much of his story remained unwritten by the end of our time together. I hoped that he would keep in touch, and encouraged him to reach out at any time if I could be helpful to him.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS

Over the course of the 2022-2023 academic year, I joined three high school seniors in the midst of their college choice processes. I watched and learned as these students made decisions, changed their minds, struggled, accomplished, and moved forward in their lives and in their life stories. Each student lived through their college choice process in a different way. Although all three of my participants experienced each one of the first four college choice stages laid out by Webb (2000) at least minimally, their experiences of these stages were not necessarily linear, as they navigated stages cyclically or engaged in multiple stages at once. In coming alongside these students as they lived out these stages (deciding, exploring, selecting, applying), I observed several narrative threads, or themes, that were woven into each story and that shaped each student's experience. These narrative themes centered on the stories that students imagined of themselves in the future, stories of support in the college process, and stories of how each student understood who they were in relation to school and in relation to disability. As I reflected on these narrative threads, I noticed places of resonance and tension both within and across students' stories, and I used these resonances and tensions as inspiration to imagine possible implications for educators who want to better support disabled students in the college choice process. There were also some stories that remained untold, which I attempt to briefly address in this final chapter as well.

Each student's story of college choice is unique, and the purpose of this research is not to draw sweeping conclusions or generalizations about what the college choice process is like for students with disabilities. Many parts of these stories will also likely resonate with students who do not receive special education services; I imagine that many

students may encounter similar challenges in the classroom and in the college choice process, whether or not they have been labeled with a disability through the school system. In many ways my student participants experienced aspects of the college choice process in expected ways, countering cultural narratives that equate disability with deviance and deficit. At the same time, there are places in each of these students' stories where they attribute their experiences in school to their disabilities or where their experiences with special education shape them. These are the places where I pause to pay attention, to wonder how social and cultural norms are at play, and to imagine how these stories could be different.

Stories of Student Identity: Special Education and Disability

Stories as lived and told are a key part of identity (Clandinin, 2013). The stories that each student told about who they were in relation to school and in relation to disability were integral to their understanding of the college choice process, and impacted the way that they approached every phase of their decision-making. These stories were complex, sometimes messy and incomplete as students continued to develop an understanding of who they were and who they were becoming in relation to others.

Understanding of Student Identity

Ashley, Jessica, and Core told stories of school as a place where they could be successful, but also as a place where they faced real academic or social challenges. All three students described academic work as difficult, with Core feeling the most strongly that school work negatively impacted his high school experience. They all felt that it took them longer to complete assignments than their classmates, and Ashley and Jessica described feeling left behind at times and needing to work harder than others. Receiving

special education services provided each student with important supports that helped them to find success in the classroom, but the way that they viewed these supports and what special education meant in terms of their identity as students differed dramatically.

Ashley's challenges in the classroom led her to identify areas of perceived academic weakness, but she did not internalize these challenges in terms of her intelligence. She felt that she wasn't good at tests, that English wasn't her favorite subject, and that science could also be difficult for her depending on the topic. She didn't love reading or writing, and would avoid it when possible. However, while school could be challenging, she felt that special education was a game changer for her and helped her to enjoy learning more. Once she had an IEP and began receiving special education services, special education felt "normal" to her and she never questioned what other students thought about her leaving the general education classroom for services. She enjoyed the small classroom environment and felt like she had a community of peers in her special education pull-out groups. Although school was still sometimes a challenging place for her academically, Ashley did not question her intelligence or ability to succeed. It might take her longer, and she might have to work harder than others, but in her story this was never because she wasn't as smart as her peers. Rather, her disability made her classroom experiences different, and her special education services helped her to achieve a level of academic success that made her proud and empowered her. She always viewed herself as capable, and college was always a future possibility in her story. Ashley also didn't often compare herself or her school experiences to her peers, and she wasn't concerned about what other students might think about her college choices.

Jessica's understanding of who she was in school was very different. Similar to Ashley's experience, Jessica struggled in school and felt that her academic experiences improved when she began to receive special education services. However, early on in her school story she began to perceive that her experiences with special education differentiated her from her peers. She felt that receiving special education services wasn't normal and that being pulled out of the general education classroom to receive small group instruction or for testing made her disability more visible. Moreover, she noticed differences between herself and her classmates in the general education classroom because she often received extra attention or support from teachers and because it took her longer to complete assignments. All of these factors combined to make Jessica feel that her experiences in the classroom were not normal and that something was wrong with her. As suggested by Kimball and colleagues (2016), disability stigma was a mediating factor for Jessica's school experiences. Over time she began to internalize these feelings as shame and to believe that she wasn't smart enough to be academically successful, despite the fact that her grades, her teachers, and her extracurricular accomplishments suggested otherwise. These feelings of academic inadequacy were so deeply ingrained in her that for a long time she didn't think she would be able to get into college.

Core provided less details of his experiences in school, but he appreciated his special education services and being able to leave the general education classroom in order to complete work in a quiet location. Receiving extensions so that he could complete his school work at a less stressful pace was helpful for him, and it seemed to feel normal to him to receive this accommodation and to be able to access other special

education services. His teachers, including his special education teachers, were an important part of what made high school enjoyable for him, despite the academic challenges.

The stories that these young people understood of themselves as students influenced every stage of the college choice process. Ashley understood herself as a student who struggled in particular areas, and she wanted to expedite her postsecondary education so that she could receive her credentials to become an occupational therapist with as little additional schooling as possible. She never questioned her ability to go to college or to become an occupational therapist, even though she sometimes found science challenging, because her story of herself as a student was one in which she could achieve academically with appropriate support and hard work. In line with this story, she wanted to make sure that her future college offered disability services so that she could continue to receive the support that she felt had made her so successful in high school. Additionally, when she took her standardized college admissions test and when she came up against obstacles during the application process, she didn't put too much pressure on herself because she was confident that she would be able to go to college despite these challenges. In contrast, Jessica understood herself as a mediocre student and wasn't sure if she was college material. The exploration process was challenging for her because she was overwhelmed by the prospect of going to college, believing that college would be hard for her because high school had been so difficult. Her standardized test scores further undermined her confidence in her ability to gain admission to college. When she selected schools to which to apply, she chose schools where her chances of admission were very high, and as a result she likely under-matched out of a fear that she wasn't

good enough to get into more competitive schools. It wasn't until after she had been admitted to college that she started to revise her story of herself as a student and to realize that she had accomplished quite a bit during high school. For Core, his negative experiences with school work left him with no desire to continue being a student after high school and contributed to his lack of motivation to move through the college choice process. His story of himself as a student was based on his strong relationships with teachers, and this story initially seemed to end with high school graduation. After he was admitted to college, he was beginning to imagine how his story as a student could continue in college with art and auto mechanic classes, but this story was only just beginning to form.

For these three young people, the stories of their student identities were not only influenced by their experiences with school and special education, but by their understanding of whether these experiences were normal in the school context. Ideas about what is normal in a given context are culturally-created (Waldschmidt, 2017), but it was clear from their stories that each student had a different understanding of how their own experience fit into a range of potential normal experiences in school. Ashley and Core perceived their experiences with special education as relatively normal and thus did not feel stigmatized by their special education designation, whereas Jessica perceived her experiences as abnormal and felt singled out as a result of receiving special education services. The differences in their understandings of what activities are "normal" within the school context brings me back to the question posed by Connor (2020): "Who decides who is normal and who is not (and by implication, is abnormal) in schools?" (p. 24). Ashley and Core seemed less aware of, or at least less concerned with, the culturally-

defined expectations of normalcy in schools. Although they may have done so unconsciously, both students rejected external definitions of normalcy and defined normal school experiences in their own terms, while Jessica tended to define her experiences in relation to larger cultural narratives of normalcy in school. The way they understood their experiences influenced how they thought of themselves in relation to their peers, in relation to their identity as students, and in relation to academic work.

Understanding of Disability

The ways that these students understood disability in terms of their identities was also complex. All three students understood their disabilities in terms of individual diagnoses, in line with the broad medicalization of disability in schools and the diagnostic processes used for identifying students for special education (Valle & Connor, 2019). Of the three students, Core seemed to most actively own his disability identity, proactively reaching out to inform me about what he would need during our meetings in order to be comfortable as a result of his ADHD and Autism. He brought up his disability diagnosis during the course of our conversations naturally, and while he was still processing his Autism diagnosis, he seemed to embrace it.

Ashley and Jessica were less certain about what disability meant to them. Ashley attributed her struggles in the classroom to her disabilities, but felt that the word disability didn't have a concrete meaning for her. She identified as having ADHD and an auditory processing disorder, but she also recognized that the students she worked with in the disability support program at her school also had disabilities and that these students had different needs from her own. She referred to the students she worked with as having "special needs," but did not refer to herself in the same way. Jessica felt that she

identified more with the word "disadvantaged" than 'disabled,' and felt uncomfortable with the idea of labeling herself with the word disabled. She seemed to fully own her disability diagnoses, but also to distinguish between having specific impairments versus being disabled. Like Ashley, Jessica also differentiated between herself and the students with cognitive and behavioral disabilities with whom she worked. Both Ashley and Jessica understood disability as a spectrum of impairment, and their description of disability reminded me of Stalker's (2012) description of the "hierarchy of impairments," in which disabled people with different types of impairment may try to differentiate themselves from one another. They seemed to be trying to reconcile their own experiences with impairment in the classroom with the larger social and cultural narratives they understood about disability, and their identity in terms of disability was very much still in formation.

Implications: Normalize Support and Create Validating Experiences

The experiences that young people have in school shape their understanding of who they are and who they have the potential to become, especially in terms of their academic potential in the classroom. Core, Jessica, and Ashley's experiences are unique to their individual stories, but they are not necessarily unique in the ways they understood their student identities in relation to their challenges in the classroom. Many students, with and without disability designations, struggle to complete academic work; many of these students may develop similar stories of student identity to the stories that have been shared here. As educators, we can play a critical role in these students' stories of identity, influencing the way they understand their experiences and how they approach the college process.

For students who live by stories of failure in the classroom and develop student identities of academic inadequacy, our role as educators should be to help these students reflect on their experiences and to develop more empowering stories about who they can be in school. One thing that struck me with all of my participants was that our conversations together prompted each of them to reflect on their experiences in and feelings about school. This deeper reflection about who they were in school did not seem to be something that they had engaged in previously, and seemed to prompt them to think in new ways about what school meant to them. For Jessica in particular, this reflection also seemed to be part of her process for developing a new story about who she was as a student and what she could do in college and beyond. Jessica also described how developing a deeper understanding of her specific impairments and how they manifested in academic spaces was empowering for her, and when members of her support team explained this to her, it helped her to redefine who she was in the classroom. Beyond encouraging students to think more deeply about their experiences and identity, educators can actively affirm students by helping them to find their strengths and to align these strengths with possible postsecondary trajectories, whether these strengths are academic or otherwise. For students who receive special education services this can be done through mandatory transition planning, but conversations should not be limited to a single instance during a student's annual IEP review meeting. Having regular conversations with educators or peer mentors about postsecondary options that capitalize on students' individual strengths can help students with disabilities to establish a more positive student identity and self-esteem in relation to what they can accomplish in school. This may be especially important for students like Jessica, who receive special

education services and view their academic experiences as abnormal or inadequate. Channeling students' energy into more positive stories about school can help them develop validating student identities and encourage them to imagine ways to continue their education in the future.

It is also important for educators to consider how we can normalize special education. In some ways this can be accomplished by creating school norms that encourage students to work collaboratively, to ask for help, and to expect to give and receive support in the classroom. As suggested by proponents of inclusion, principles of Universal Design of Learning (UDL) can also be used to design classroom spaces to be more conducive to the success of all students (Connor & Olander, 2020). However, to truly normalize special education requires educators and communities to rewrite the larger socio-historical narratives that position disability as deviancy and deficiency, creating new narratives of school as a place where students are appreciated for their differences and for what each student uniquely brings to the school community. This will require us to challenge some of the traditional narratives of American schooling that focus on academic achievement as the hallmark of success, and to make space for narratives that define success differently and individually for each student. As McDermott (1993) states, "in America, we make something of differential rates of learning to the point that the rate of learning rather than the learning is the total measure of the learner" (p. 272). Changing perspectives about disability will also require educators to reflect on how our practices construct ability and disability and to reject cultural notions of "normal" learning to redefine what types of learning can be valued in schools.

Counternarratives: Challenging Disability as Deviance in College Choice

While students' understandings of disability and their experiences with special education impacted their stories of school and college choice in important ways, many aspects of their stories of college choice are no different from what educators might consider to be normal college choice processes. In contrast to the long-standing cultural narratives that position disability as deviance (Nielsen, 2012), these parts of their stories are significant in that they are not remarkable. Factors in the college choice process that are important to high school students in general, such as parental involvement (Perna & Titus, 2004; Ross, 2016), school support (McDonough, 2005), and career aspirations (Edwin et al., 2022), were all major factors in the stories of college choice that my student participants lived out over the course of this research. These similarities in experiences challenge the prevailing "educational myth…that there are *two* types of children, able and disabled, who require different kinds of instruction delivered by differently trained teachers working in parallel systems of public education" (emphasis in the original; Valle & Connor, 2019, pp. 53–54), and suggest that students who receive special education services do not necessarily behave differently or need vastly different supports in all educational endeavors. In the next two sections, I discuss students' stories of future selves and stories of support, many parts of which will likely resonate with students with and without disabilities alike. While I have noted places where disability intersected with these stories for my participants, these stories may also seem to be those of "normal" high school students, reminding me of McDermott's (1993) suggestion that the manifestation of disability, deficit, and difference is dependent on a student's context.

Stories of Future Selves: Uncertainty and Direction

Interwoven with each student's story of the college choice process were stories about uncertain futures. Whether or not each student had a clear vision of their future career impacted every stage of their college decision-making, especially the initial deciding phase. As each student's story of college choice unfolded, it also became clear that being able to envision a future as a college student was important to their processes. While students could in some ways imagine themselves as part of a future campus community, there were many aspects of the college experience that were unknown to them and which made their stories of future selves less clear. Finally, students' uncertainty about how to navigate the college application process caused significant stress and was a barrier to beginning and completing the actual application. While uncertainty about the future and the application process is not unique to students with disabilities, disability intersected with these students' stories of uncertainty and direction in meaningful ways.

Career Aspirations

Career and educational aspirations are closely entwined (Beal & Crockett, 2013), and research has linked career uncertainty to a lower likelihood of college enrollment (Edwin et al., 2022). Webb (2000) suggests that having clear career aspirations can provide more direction for high school students with disabilities as they navigate the college choice process. This was true for Ashley, who was the only one of my student participants who had a clear vision for her future career. Ashley knew she wanted to work in the fields of nursing or special education for a long time, and this implied future shaped how she approached all of her decisions around college. She knew that careers in either of these fields would require postsecondary education, and so the decision to go to

college seemed natural to her. Her early exploration phase was focused on schools that offered majors in these fields. Once she began to envision a future in occupational therapy, it changed her exploration and selection phase as she narrowed her focus to schools that would offer her a pathway to this future career. She used search tools provided by her high school and information from professionals at her school who worked in occupational therapy or similar fields to create her shortlist. When she filled out her application, she chose extracurricular activities that were relevant to occupational therapy and answered school-specific application questions in a way that highlighted her career goals. As she was developing this story of her future self, she was also living into this story by working as an intern with an occupational therapist in a local school.

In contrast, Jessica did not have a story of her future self that necessitated college. Her initial career considerations did not require college, and while she had identified some academic interests by the beginning of her senior year, she did not have a strong vision for her future career. This made her uncertain as to whether college was the right choice for her after high school, especially because she felt that she should have a major and career goal before going to college. Her previous experiences with school and her low academic self-worth also complicated her understanding of what college and career opportunities were open to her. Once she decided to pursue postsecondary education, her uncertainty about her future also made it difficult to explore and select schools for her shortlist. The seemingly limitless college options without a clear sense of direction made choosing schools for her shortlist overwhelming for her, and her resulting anxiety impeded her ability to move forward in the process independently.

Similarly Core did not have a clear picture of his future career, but he did not envision college as part of his future and was initially resistant to the idea of pursuing postsecondary education. He thought that he might want to become a police officer, and while he had done some initial career exploration by talking to the resource officer at his school, he was uncertain whether he would need any college education or other training in order to pursue police work. Notably, Core also knew that his dad thought becoming a police officer would be difficult for him because of his disabilities. For Core, his disability status and experiences of impairment made his future career options less certain. It seemed that Core was still in the process of envisioning the future for himself, as at different points in our conversations he mentioned working at a wolf preserve, continuing his art, or taking automotive mechanic training courses at community college as potential career pathways.

Interestingly, while both Ashley and Jessica were interested in careers related to the field of special education, neither attributed these interests to their own experiences with disability or special education. Instead, they both felt that their interests in this field were derived from their commitment to service and the desire to positively impact other people's lives. Although their experiences were not consciously part of the equation in their stories of possible careers, I wonder if these experiences may have unconsciously shaped them in relation to this work.

Imagining the College Experience

Even as each of these students began to imagine college as part of their future stories, it became apparent that there were many aspects of the college experience that were still difficult for them to envision.

Ashley saw herself becoming a commuter student who would still take part in a vibrant campus community, which shaped how she experienced her campus tours during her exploration process. Her top choice school stood out from the rest in part because it had many spaces for non-residential students to socialize or complete academic work. Ashley also envisioned herself receiving disability support services in college, so it was important to her that she could easily identify where to find these services. At the same time, she had not given much thought to the particular services she would need, nor to the academic program she would need to follow in order to complete her degree in occupational therapy. These aspects of the college experience were less clear to her, and it wasn't until after she had finished applying to college that she learned she would have to take many science courses, which she found to be challenging in high school.

Jessica also felt that it was important to be able to envision herself as part of a campus community, and she visited schools with a wide range of characteristics in order to try to determine what she wanted from the college experience. This was difficult for her because she felt like her academic experiences in high school were limited, and she wasn't sure what type of academic setting would be best for her in college because she had yet to experience a large lecture or a class with only a few students. Jessica felt similarly about choosing a major based on her limited knowledge of career fields, which influenced her decision to apply with an undeclared major. She also mentioned that she wanted to continue receiving disability support services in college, and like Ashley, was unclear about what services she might want to pursue. Jessica discovered through her exploration process that there were many stories of college that she could choose for herself, but she couldn't yet imagine herself living any of them.

Core had a limited picture of what the college experience would be like, likely because he was not strongly interested in college and had essentially opted out of the exploration and selection phase of college choice beyond what his school provided. He visited one college and felt that it was fine, but hadn't really thought much about the college experience. Core also questioned his family's future situation, both financially and geographically, which added further uncertainty to his story and made it difficult for him to picture himself in college. However, when we talked about taking art classes, Core was genuinely interested to hear about how different the college experience could be from his high school experience. He seemed to be more interested after he was accepted, and he wanted to tour the campus again in order to get a better idea of what his college experience might entail.

Navigating the Application Process

Understanding how to complete various steps of the application process and how to interact with higher education professionals were also major areas of uncertainty for all three students. While their stories in relation to this type of uncertainty probably resonate with many high school students, there were a few places where their experiences with disability intersected with this uncertainty and made the process more complicated.

Both Ashley and Jessica shared that their uncertainty about when and how to complete parts of the Common Application made their college process more challenging. Initially, they were each uncertain about what information the Common Application required and found it difficult to motivate themselves to start the application. Ashley described lacking a sense of urgency to begin because she hadn't thought about application deadlines, and Jessica described feeling overwhelmed by the prospect of the

application. Jessica also attributed her lack of motivation to her ADHD, and mentioned that she knew other students with disabilities had a similar challenge with motivation to start the application process. However, they each ultimately discovered that much of the application was easier to complete than they had anticipated, describing the beginning questions as similar to the information you would fill out at a doctor's office. Ashley and Jessica also both felt uncertain about whether they could contact admissions representatives throughout their college processes. Jessica most clearly described the narrative that she understood about college admissions personnel – that they were unapproachable.

Additionally, Ashley and Jessica each described challenges related to disclosing their disability status in the application. For Ashley, the challenge was that she didn't have a space to disclose her status, which was something she wanted to communicate with colleges so that they would be able to direct her to the appropriate disability services. She was unsure about how her current special education services would translate to the college environment and whether her college would have access to her IEP. Jessica, on the other hand, had to deal with a confusing situation in which a college paused her application when she disclosed her disability status, leaving her in limbo until her counselor was able to help her contact the school to find out what had happened.

Core also demonstrated uncertainty in the application process, primarily in that he was unsure about what application he would need to fill out in order to apply to his community college. He was surprised to discover that he didn't need to fill out the Common Application, and it seemed that the daunting prospect of the Common Application had been part of his hesitancy to begin the process. All three of my student

participants discussed their lack of motivation or reluctance to begin the application process, which is considered one of the typical manifestations of ADHD (reluctance to engage in sustained mental effort; Glanzman & Sell, 2013). However, I would imagine that the prospect of beginning college applications is a struggle for many students, disabled and nondisabled alike, given the amount of work that applications require and the importance often ascribed to the college application process.

Implications: Envisioning a Future that includes College

For my student participants, and likely for most high school students, it was difficult to imagine what their lives would be like after high school graduation. Some of their hesitancy to envision stories of themselves in the future was a result of their desire to be present in living their current stories of high school, but some of it was also due to feeling overwhelmed by the college process and uncertain of what postsecondary options were open to them. This uncertainty can cause an immense amount of stress and anxiety for students. As educators, we can help students to imagine clearer stories of who they are becoming through and after their college processes by encouraging career exploration activities, creating college-like experiences for students while they are still in high school, introducing the application process early, and critically reflecting on ways that the application itself might serve as a disabling structure.

Career exploration early and often can help students to determine what career pathway to pursue and what college majors may be aligned with their target career (Webb, 2000). While any type of career exploration might be helpful, trying to provide real-world, hands-on experiences as much as possible will likely benefit students the most. For example, Ashley developed an interest in occupational therapy through

conversations with professionals in the field, but completing an internship in occupational therapy gave her the experiences to affirm her career plans and to help solidify her commitment to the work. Besides interning, opportunities to shadow professionals in the field can also provide students with this type of experience (Webb, 2000). Early career exploration might be especially important for students with disabilities who are unsure about pursuing college due to past academic challenges in the classroom, such as Jessica. Identifying a desirable career goal prior to senior year and understanding the multiple pathways to achieving that goal provides students with a clearer picture of their postsecondary options.

Similarly, trying to offer students experiences that mimic college environments can help students to picture themselves pursuing postsecondary education and give them an idea of what type of college will be the right fit for them. High school educators could offer mock lectures or small seminar classes to give high school seniors a feel for what it might be like to be in a class with 100 students versus only a handful. If possible, creating opportunities to pair seniors with local alumni to provide an insider's tour of nearby colleges could also give students a behind-the-scenes look at what it's like to be a college student. College admissions professionals could create similar programs by allowing high school students the opportunity to sit in on a class for a day or to shadow current students. These opportunities may be available at some colleges for admitted students, but partnering with local high schools to allow all students to get these experiences could benefit a wider group of potential applicants. Experiences like these can not only help students to picture themselves at college, but to also help them to understand the ways that their college experience can differ from their high school experience. For students

like Core and Jessica who felt that many parts of high school were difficult, being able to envision postsecondary education as a different experience may make college a more attractive option.

Finally, there can be a great deal of confusion for high school students around the actual application process. Introducing parts of the application early and having students complete pieces of the application during school could help to alleviate some of the misunderstandings that students have about the process. Webb (2000) suggests that school professionals assist students in developing a detailed timeline for completing their applications that breaks down each part of the process into more manageable pieces. Providing students with samples of completed Common Applications or community college applications could also help students to visualize what the application entails. For students with disabilities, the introduction to the application could be included as part of their postsecondary transition plan, providing students with dedicated time to go over the application process and types of applications with a special educator or college counselor. Introducing students to the application process this way might also help students to be more cognizant of the transition planning process.

Admissions professionals also should consider ways in which the application itself and the application process as a whole create structural barriers for students with disabilities and other groups of students. The most egregious example of a structural barrier within the application in my participants' stories was when Jessica found that she had inadvertently paused her application to one school when she checked a box to express that she wished to continue receiving disability accommodation in college. However, there are other places where the application may be creating additional,

unnecessary obstacles for students. Providing explanations or samples for students to clarify the information required for questions, such as what is meant by "education level" in the parent information section, could improve students' understanding and facility with filling out the application. Limiting the number of extracurricular activities that students are asked to list would save students time and stress over trying to fill every line, especially when admissions offices are typically most interested in the top activities to which a student is most committed. Professionals in the field should also reflect on whether the Common Application prompts and the larger conversations around college essays are encouraging students to relive pain narratives (as Jessica deemed them, "sob stories"), and to think about whether this is healthy for students as well as what purpose it serves in the admissions process. Standardized college admissions testing as a whole, and the process for disabled students to request accommodations in particular, are also areas ripe for reform, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the new broad adoptions of test-optional admissions policies. This seems to be the right moment to consider what purpose these tests actually serve, given the research on inequities in test-taking behaviors and outcomes (Holzman et al., 2019; Rosinger et al., 2021), and to reconsider their use in the admissions process. Additionally, admissions professionals should think about whether applications have been designed inclusively for transgender students, and to think about how applications can be adjusted to affirm students of all gender identities.

Stories of Support: Resources and Relationships

All three of my student participants expressed that the college choice process was difficult for them at times, and receiving support was central to the stories that they lived

and told about their experience. This support came from family members and educators or was structured into the curriculum at their high school. While they each considered support to be critical to their success, there were also places in their stories where they needed more support or felt like they couldn't access the type of support that was provided.

Family Support

Parental support can be a key part of the college choice process for all students, including for students with disabilities (Hossler et al., 1999; Ross, 2016; Webb, 2000). For my student participants, their families were a critical source of support and often a driving force in places where their college process stalled. Each student had one family member in particular who provided substantial support in their story of college choice. For Ashley and Jessica, it was their mothers; for Core, it was one of his fathers.

In Ashley's case, her mother introduced her to the idea of occupational therapy and initiated the exploration process for her by organizing college tours. Her mom also sat with her to begin the selecting process by creating a shortlist of schools in Naviance. While Ashley's dad provided support by proofreading her essay and taking her on one campus tour, her mom was the major source of home support for her college process for her. Similarly, Jessica described her mom as essential to her college process, to the extent that her mom was driving Jessica's exploration phase when Jessica was unable to do so herself. Her mom never pressured her to pursue college, but once Jessica had decided to do so her mom was critical in moving Jessica's college choice process forward by organizing tours and hiring a tutor to help with her application so that she would not fall behind. Jessica felt that she and her mom were often working together, without any

additional support, as she made decisions about college. Core's father played a leading role in his story of college choice and gave Core the initial push to pursue college. It seemed that Core's uncertainty about his future was part of the reason that his dad encouraged him to go to college, and his dad was willing to provide whatever support Core needed, such as taking him back to visit his community college campus after he was admitted so that he could get a better feel for it. While Middletown High School also provided a significant amount of college support, the logistical, emotional, and motivational support provided by these students' families would be difficult to replace with school supports alone.

School Supports

A student's school context plays a key role in the college choice process, and school supports can influence every stage of a student's college journey (Perna, 2006; Webb, 2000). Middletown High School provided resources and support to students in all stages of the college choice process and had a well-established college-going environment with a high proportion of graduates going on to postsecondary education. Much of this college support was delivered through the school's guidance office by school counselors. Counselors provided information about the college application process, opportunities to explore college options, and direct instruction in completing parts of the application. For Jessica and Ashley especially, their school counselor played an immensely important role in guiding their college choice processes.

Both Ashley and Jessica described multiple ways in which their counselor directly influenced their college processes. Ashley's meeting with her counselor in junior year initiated her exploration process, and she initially visited schools from a list that her

counselor provided. Her counselor also provided advice for choosing a teacher to write a recommendation and prompted her to begin the application process when he asked her about her college deadlines. Later, when she was finishing her application, he helped her put her extracurricular activities in rank order. Jessica also described the meeting with her counselor in junior year as the beginning of her exploration process, and his advice to start exploring all different types of schools directed her approach for her initial college exploration. When it came to filling out the Common Application, Jessica credited her success to her one-on-one meetings with her counselor, without which she didn't feel that she would have been able to progress through the application so quickly. Her counselor also clarified parts of the application and helped her to navigate the confusing situation that arose when she disclosed her disability on one of her applications.

While their high school counselor was the most influential educator in their college process, other educators at their high school and in the community also played an important support role for each of these students. Ashley described how multiple educators influenced her selection process by sharing their experiences as alumni of various schools on her initial shortlist. Both Ashley and Jessica mentioned that their special education teachers helped them to secure accommodations on the SAT, which was especially important for Jessica as she navigated multiple rounds of appeals in order to receive the accommodations she was seeking. Jessica also described ways that her social worker, who was part of her special education support team, influenced her college process and her understanding of her disability. Core was less specific in his stories of support from school, but he did identify his teachers in general as important sources of support for him throughout his college process.

Jessica and Ashley also talked about the ways that college support had been structured into their curriculum, sometimes in helpful ways and sometimes in ways that felt less productive. They were assigned to write their college application essay during their junior year English class, and while this was a productive support for Ashley, Jessica found it to be less helpful. Ashley took the assignment seriously, both because she knew she was going to be graded on it and because she knew she wouldn't want to have to write another essay for her application during senior year. She also found the structure of the assignment to be helpful, and appreciated having a rubric and feedback from her teacher in order to strengthen her assignment, which she ended up submitting almost unchanged in her final application. In contrast, although Jessica wrote an essay during her English class, she felt that it wasn't strong and she didn't want to submit it for her college applications. Some of the reason this assignment was less productive for Jessica was because she wasn't ready to think about college at the time, but she also felt that the situational context was not conducive to her writing a strong essay since she had a substitute teacher and didn't feel that she received productive feedback.

Both Jessica and Ashley also talked about their guidance seminar course in junior and senior year and how the course gave them important information about the application process. One of the most helpful supports they received through this course was an information sheet that provided the answers for the application questions about their high school, such as the school's application code, class size, and grading scale. Ashley also described finding it helpful to discuss parts of the application with her classmates, such as which extracurriculars they were planning to include in the activities portion of the application. While other important information was communicated during

this course, Jessica described the amount of information as overwhelming, and it was hard for her to keep track of the resources that were provided. Both students also mentioned that while they were provided with time to work on their applications during class, it was difficult to focus and to motivate themselves to actually accomplish much during this time. Although Ashley attributed this to her desire to socialize with friends, Jessica attributed her lack of work during class to the distractions of the classroom environment and being overwhelmed and stressed about the college process.

Their high school also offered some structured opportunities for college exploration, although only Core took advantage of any of these. Ashley mentioned that the high school encouraged students to attend a local college fair, but that she didn't attend because she felt it would be too overwhelming and stressful for her, especially because noisy environments could be a challenge for her as a result of her disability. She also didn't attend any of the college visits organized by her school and seemed to be unsure of what opportunities to visit colleges had been offered. On the other hand, Core did attend one of the college visits organized by his high school, which was his only college visit and which provided him with exposure to the community college to which he ultimately applied and was admitted. Without this opportunity offered by his high school, it is unlikely that Core would have done much college exploration since he wasn't really interested in pursuing postsecondary education. Jessica did not mention any exploration opportunities provided by the high school, and thus they were not a part of her story.

Finally, all of the students had access to their own school-issued computer during the course of the school year, and all of them used this computer to work on their application.

Implications: Build Accessible Support into the Curriculum

Relationships are a key part of any story, and these stories of college choice are no exception. When educators build caring and supportive relationships with their students, it makes a difference in all of their educational experiences. Beyond supportive relationships with educators, high schools can strategically integrate college application assistance into the curriculum to ensure that all students receive support during this process. However, when building supports into the curriculum, it is important to consider whether all students will be able to access these supports, and to offer multiple ways for students to receive assistance.

Middletown High offered a number of important college supports to students, but students utilized these supports in different ways and with varying levels of success. For students with disabilities in particular, it is important to consider whether supports are accessible. Ashley found that in-person college fairs were too overwhelming and distracting due to her ADHD and auditory processing disorder. An alternative venue for exploring a wide range of college options, such as a virtual college fair or information session, might provide the same information without the stress of an in-person event and could allow students to explore options at their own pace. Virtual events might also make it possible to add other accessibility elements, such as closed captioning for students with hearing impairments. Additionally, offering multiple opportunities to complete parts of the college application for a grade and with feedback could help students progress

through the application more quickly by providing structure and motivation. Writing a college essay in English class seems like the most natural way to incorporate a part of the application into the curriculum, but other pieces could be creatively incorporated as well. For example, in the senior capstone course at Middletown High, students could be required to fill out parts of the Common Application form or to practice answering questions about why they want to go to specific schools. It could also be helpful to offer multiple opportunities to work on the essay, so that students who are not ready to commit to college at the end of junior year still have a chance in senior year to take advantage of the structured support that writing a college essay as a class assignment provides.

For all three of my student participants, having one-on-one support was extremely helpful to them in filling out their applications. For Jessica and Ashley, much of that support was provided during meetings with their guidance counselor. In my role as researcher, I also provided this support for each student during our observation sessions, which proves that this work does not necessarily need to be done by guidance counselors alone. Any educator in the high school could provide the structured supervision that I provided for students to work on their applications, and finding ways to integrate this into the college counseling process could allow more students to benefit from individualized support. Additionally, for students who often receive small-group instruction as a special education accommodation, delivering the guidance seminar course in a small group might allow them to access the information with fewer distractions and with more dedicated support from a teacher. It was also incredibly helpful for students to have a personal laptop on which to complete applications, which is not something that every high school may be able to provide.

While secondary schools are the primary context for college-related support, colleges can also provide support to students to make the application process more straightforward and to ensure that the ways that they provide information to prospective students are accessible. Local colleges could work together to create a virtual college fair that would be accessible to students beyond a single high school, or provide virtual options for connecting with an admissions officer or current student. Admissions professionals can also make themselves, or other informed representatives such as student workers, more available to connect directly with students who have questions about their school. Organizing volunteers from the college to run application workshops at local high schools could also help strengthen relationships and improve colleges' yield rates, since students may feel more connected to a school where they have received support. Colleges should also think about how they are messaging details about their campus community and belonging, and should consider ways to make their institutional messaging more inclusive of students from diverse backgrounds – and to address underlying issues of exclusion on which that messaging is based. Additionally, colleges could easily provide an option on the application for students with disabilities to communicate about whether they would like to receive accommodations in college, and then use that information to connect students to their disability services office. This could provide students with additional support in their college process and ensure a smoother transition to college academic work for these students.

Untold Stories

Finally, it is part of the narrative inquiry process to pay attention to the stories that are not told by participants. For the students with whom I worked and learned over the

course of this research, stories about race, gender, and socioeconomic class were largely absent from their stories of college choice. As White, middle-class students, the privileges of their racial identity and socioeconomic status made these aspects of their identity less salient for them in the college choice process. It is also likely that the intersection of all of these identities shaped each student's story, potentially in ways that students did not consciously recognize. Socioeconomic status only manifested in the students' stories in terms of their concerns about the costs of college, largely in the sense that the costs were somewhat unfathomable to the students despite the fact that their parents were financially equipped to support their postsecondary education in some way. However, these stories fit within a larger narrative of college costs in America and the concerns of the middle class that college is becoming increasingly unaffordable.

Gender identity was only salient for Core, who came up against the tension of having to write his birth name on his college application. This is an example of the administrative governance of gender described by Spade (2015), which Lange and colleagues (2015) summarize as "the ways data systems create, produce, and delegitimize particular ways of being gendered" (p. 1723). The administrative classification of gender, which cis-gender people typically take for granted and which is pervasive in the collection of personal data, is a source of violence for and serves as a tool to oppress transgender people (Spade, 2015). For Core, whose legal name and legal gender did not match his identity, the structure of his college application was a source of delegitimization of his gender identity. Prior research has shown that institutional policies and resources that affirm students' gender identities can impact transgender students'

college choice process (Lange et al., 2022), and additional research in this area is needed to better understand the experiences of transgender students.

Race only came up in conversation with one participant when the student shared that they were worried that their whiteness made them less demographically desirable to colleges. I discuss this instance here rather than within the student's story because the student expressed discomfort with and awareness that their feelings of racial disadvantage as a white person might reflect poorly on them, and so I want to respect the student's confidentiality while also acknowledging the importance of this part of the story. The cultural narrative that whiteness is a disadvantage in competing for access to college in the United States is part of the larger American system of whiteness as property. Harris (1993) describes how race and property have been closely entwined throughout our nation's history, with whites using property rights as a tool of racial domination and economic subordination in order to maintain white supremacy. Whiteness as property has evolved over time from the state-sanctioned practices of white land conquest and the extermination or enslavement and subjugation of Indigenous and Black people into "the settled expectations of a relative white privilege as a legitimate and natural baseline" (Harris, 1993, p. 1714). In the world of college admissions, this has led to a widespread cultural belief among white people that affirmative action is a denial of the implicit and expected rights of white people to the property of higher education (Harris, 1993). As Harris explains, "in according 'preferences' for Blacks and other oppressed groups, affirmative action is said to be 'reverse discrimination' against whites, depriving them of their right to equal protection of the laws" (1993, p. 1767). Understanding whiteness as property informs this part of my white participant's story.

Their discomfort in admitting their perceived disadvantage illustrates an awareness of white privilege while at the same time feeling uncomfortable with the potential disruption of whiteness as property, in this case the presumed white entitlement to postsecondary education. The belief among white people that their whiteness makes them less attractive as college applicants because of affirmative action is a response to this discomfort with the disruption of white supremacy, and has led to the creation of a white cultural narrative that admissions professionals are systematically discriminating against white applicants. This narrative reasserts whiteness as property, and has functioned in legal disputes to reaffirm white claims to the entitlement of higher education (Harris, 1993).

The cultural valuation of whiteness are property is pervasive (Harris, 1993), as is the resulting narrative around whiteness as a source of disadvantage to white people in the college admissions process. It is a narrative that I experienced many times when working in the field of selective admissions when white parents or white colleagues would make comments implying that a prospective student of color was admitted because of their race, or conversely that a white student was denied admission as a result of affirmative action. My failure to challenge these assumptions has made me complicit in this narrative through what DiAngelo (2018) calls "white solidarity," or the desire to "not cause another white person to feel racial discomfort by confronting them when they say or do something racially problematic" (p. 57). In this research story, I similarly failed to further probe my student's feelings about race in the admissions process and once again proved my complicity in this larger cultural narrative, missing a potential opportunity for both my white student participant and I to critically reflect on the ways that our socialized racial biases come into play in the ways we think about college choice. On this front I am

very much still a work in progress. Future research on college choice should try to unpack this narrative to understand how white students understand their whiteness as a factor in their college process and how cultural narratives around race and college admissions may be contributing to racial tension or bias among white students. This is especially relevant given the June 2023 decision by the Supreme Court in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* (2023), which ruled affirmative action policies at Harvard College and the University of North Carolina to be unconstitutional and served as a blow to college affirmative action policies more broadly, reaffirming whiteness as property in the admissions process.

Additionally, the fact that race was not a salient part of my participants' stories of college choice and this research story is a reflection of our collective white privilege, in that we can most often live out the stories of our daily lives without considering our race (McIntosh, 1989). As an emerging research professional, it is also important for me to reflect on how my choice of a high school research site with a predominantly white student population translated to a lack of racial diversity among my participants, excluding the stories of disabled students of color who have different school experiences than disabled white students (Annamma et al., 2016). My recruitment process was largely based on the volunteer efforts of an educator at my research site, and I was grateful to have each participant that agreed to work with me for my dissertation. At the same time, my failure to strategically recruit participants from racially-minoritized backgrounds denies agency to these students, silences their voices, and neglects to acknowledge them as valuable sources of knowledge (Boveda & Annamma, 2023). This is something I must

consider as I move forward in my role as a researcher and an educator, and to commit to producing more inclusive research in the future.

Finally, my student participants also navigated their experiences of high school and the college choice process during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. Notably, none of my participants described COVID-19 as a major part of their school story, other than Ashley mentioning that she had contracted COVID at some point during high school and Jessica stating that she was grateful for the test-optional admissions policies that colleges had adopted in response to the pandemic. For these students, it seemed that COVID was merely a footnote in their larger experiences of high school. While my participants' experiences during the pandemic were likely mitigated by their access to resources as a result of their socioeconomic status, the pandemic lockdown drastically altered the course of their daily lives, and the fact that these students did not incorporate COVID as a major part of their stories suggests a level of resilience with which high school students are not often credited.

Researcher as Instrument

As discussed in the methodology chapter of this dissertation, it is important to acknowledge my role in this inquiry as the researcher. Many qualitative studies will discuss the role of the researcher as an instrument through which the research is shaped. Narrative inquirers address both the ways that we shape the research, as well as the ways that the research process shapes us (Clandinin, 2013). When I began this research, I had many questions about the ways that we serve students with disabilities in our schools. In my roles as a teacher, an admissions professional, and an educator in other capacities, my stories about the ways that disability was understood in education spaces made me

uncomfortable, especially as I reflected on my own complicity in perpetuating stories about disability as deficit. Having recently lived a story of the college admissions process from an institutional admissions perspective, I also had many questions about the college choice and application process. On the most basic level, I wondered how students navigated this process since it has changed so drastically from when I completed my own applications several decades ago. Knowing the inequities that permeate the admissions process, I also wondered how our cultural narratives about disability intersect with the college choice process in students' experiences.

My past experiences with education and my understanding of disability as a cultural product shaped every aspect of this inquiry, from the background literature I chose to present in this dissertation, to the questions I devised in my interview protocols, to the choices I made about which elements of each student's story would be included in the final research text. While I tried to remain aware of my own preconceptions in order to leave space for the inquiry of students' experiences to unfold naturally, I also recognize that who I am as an educator shaped the way that I related to my student participants as well as my perspective on their experiences. My students' understanding of who I was as a researcher also shaped the inquiry. For example, although I didn't ask questions about their understanding of disability until after students had completed their application, all of my participants knew that I was interested in special education and all of them shared some of their experiences with special education with me without prompting. They also knew about my background in admissions, and asked me questions about the admissions process as a result. Additionally, I provided each of them with support in their application process during our observation periods together, which

undoubtedly influenced their choice process in some way, but which was a central part of the inquiry. I have included the places where I offered more than minimal support in the narratives presented here in order to account for this in some way, but I also believe that it would have been unethical for me not to have provided this support in the context of my relationship with participants. As discussed in the untold stories above, my race also shaped my relationship with my students and the inquiry process as a whole.

Narrative inquirers often refer to their research questions as "research puzzles" in order to acknowledge that they do not have expectations of a definitive answer at the end of the inquiry process (Clandinin, 2013). Through this inquiry I learned from my student participants about the ways that special education and disability can influence the college choice process, but I also learned that there are no simple answers in understanding the many ways that disability and college choice intersect. Additionally, while I began this inquiry with skepticism about elements of our system of special education in America, I want to acknowledge that the special education services that each of my participants received were a major part of each of their stories of school success, though sometimes in complicated ways. Although receiving services could be stigmatizing, the actual services provided by educators made a real difference in how these students experienced academic learning and could also be empowering for them. Thus while I have tried to imagine ways that educators could learn from these stories by sharing possible implications, I end my inquiry with more questions than answers, and I still wonder what other possibilities exist for special education and for the students who find themselves in the special education system.

Concluding Thoughts

There is a larger cultural narrative in the United States about disability as a challenge in education spaces. It is a cultural narrative that I experienced as a classroom teacher, and which each of my student participants experienced at some point over the course of their unfolding stories of college choice. At the same time, the stories that my participants shared with me were more complex than the common tropes of disability leading to academic failure or the need to overcome obstacles in order to achieve in school. These stories were about living with disability in the classroom in complicated ways in relation to educators, in relation to other students, and in relation to who these young people were as students and were becoming as young adults. Moreover, while their experiences with disability and school influenced their college choice processes at every stage, these were not the only defining features of their experiences of college choice. The complexity of these students' stories and of their developing identities in relation to disability make it all the more important for Disability Studies scholars to continue to make space for disabled students to tell their individual stories so that we can better understand their experiences.

I have often heard people say that "college is not for everyone." While I believe that not everyone needs to go to college in order to find successful careers and to lead fulfilling lives, reflecting on this statement in light of my current research puzzle gives me pause. Although the presumed sentiment behind this statement is that not everyone will find college to be an appealing option, there is quite a lot to be said about the literal meaning of this phrase. Who exactly is college for?

Historically, higher education in America was not meant for most groups of people. Colleges were not initially conceptualized to be the great equalizer that we

imagine they could or should be today. Rather colleges were created as tools of social reproduction, and I would argue that our system of higher education continues to serve in this function in many of the same ways today. Moreover, colleges historically were not meant for students with disabilities. Our system of postsecondary education was not designed with disabled people in mind, nor was college considered to be a realistic option for students with disabilities for several hundred years. Although the landscape of American higher education has evolved significantly since its exclusionary beginnings, I wonder if some of these foundational assumptions about who college is for remain embedded in our education system.

When we say that college is not for everyone, it implies that we can categorize students into two groups – those who are meant for college, and those who are not. Who do we picture when we say a student is college material? Are we thinking about the straight-A student in all Advanced Placement classes, as Jessica did? Conversely, who do we picture when we say a student isn't meant for college? Are we thinking about the students with low grades, the students who skip school, or the students who exit the school system before high school graduation? Are we thinking about the students who feel like they are falling behind or the students who spend the majority of their day outside of the general education classroom? Who are these students who are presumed not to be college material, and what messages might we be sending them both inside and outside of the classroom to signal that college is not for them? How might we be implying that they are less academically sufficient or that school is not a place where they can be successful?

The stories that these three students shared with me made me wonder how we as educators can make school a more inclusive and affirming place for all students, regardless of their academic achievement. I wonder what it would look like to walk into a high school where every student felt successful in their own way, and where postsecondary education felt like a viable option to all students, should they wish to pursue it. Creating this type of school will take some imagination, and it will also require us to listen more closely to our students' stories. As Clandinin (2006) suggests, "perhaps in listening and attending to children's stories as they live with teachers in schools we can create conditions that allow children to compose other stories of themselves, to change the stories they live by" (p. 52). Through listening to students and living stories alongside them, I believe that we can change the stories we live by as educators as well.

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Appendix

Interview Protocols

Interview 1: Background & Deciding to Go to College

Introductory Remarks

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research project. In the next 30 – 60 minutes, I want to focus on your school experiences and how you decided to go to college. I will ask some initial questions to prompt your reflection, but please feel free to take our conversation in another direction or to share another story if something else is more important to you. Please also feel free to stop and ask me any questions at any time if you'd like to do so.

Before we begin, I just want to remind you that participation in this project is voluntary, and you can choose to stop this interview at any time or to decline to answer any question. Do you have any questions?

[Pause to answer any participant questions]

If you have any additional questions, please feel free to stop me and ask them at any time during or after our conversation.

Finally, I'd like to record our interview so that I can make sure I capture our conversation accurately. Is it alright with you for me to record this conversation?

Opening Question:

Can you start by telling me a little about your high school experiences so far?

Prompts:

- What has your academic experience been like? What classes did you like/dislike?

- What has your experience with special education been like?

- What has been your favorite part of high school so far?

- What are you most looking forward to this year? Is there anything you are not looking forward to?

- As you begin your last year of high school, how are you feeling about leaving high school?

- Why do you want to go to college?

- When did you first decide you wanted to go to college?

- Why do you want to go to a two-year/four-year school?

- Who influenced your decision to apply to college? (School professionals? Family? Peers?)

- What are you hoping to get out of a college education?

Concluding Remarks

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today. I will reach out to you in the next few weeks to schedule our next conversation. In the meantime, if you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out at any time. Thank you again!

Interview 2: Exploring College Options

Introductory Remarks

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research project. In the next 30 – 60 minutes, I want to focus on how you are exploring different college options. I will ask some initial questions to prompt your reflection, but please feel free to take our conversation in another direction or to share another story if something else is more important to you. Please also feel free to stop and ask me any questions at any time if you'd like to do so.

Before we begin, I just want to remind you that participation in this project is voluntary, and you can choose to stop this interview at any time or to decline to answer any question. Do you have any questions?

[Pause to answer any participant questions]

If you have any additional questions, please feel free to stop me and ask them at any time during or after our conversation.

Finally, I'd like to record our interview so that I can make sure I capture our conversation accurately. Is it alright with you for me to record this conversation?

Opening Question:

What have you been doing to learn more about your college options?

Prompts:

- Who has played a role in the way you have searched for college options?

- What type of school activities have you done in relation to learning more about specific colleges?

- What activities have you done outside of school to explore your college options?

Concluding Remarks

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today. I will reach out to you in the next few weeks to schedule our next conversation. In the meantime, if you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out at any time. Thank you again!

Interview 3: Selecting a Choice Set

Introductory Remarks

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research project. In the next 30 – 60 minutes, I want to focus on how you decided which colleges to apply to. I will ask some initial questions to prompt your reflection, but please feel free to take our conversation in another direction or to share another story if something else is more important to you. Please also feel free to stop and ask me any questions at any time if you'd like to do so.

Before we begin, I just want to remind you that participation in this project is voluntary, and you can choose to stop this interview at any time or to decline to answer any question. Do you have any questions?

[Pause to answer any participant questions]

If you have any additional questions, please feel free to stop me and ask them at any time during or after our conversation.

Finally, I'd like to record our interview so that I can make sure I capture our conversation accurately. Is it alright with you for me to record this conversation?

Opening Question:

How did you decide which colleges to apply to?

Prompts:

- What factors are important to you as you decide which colleges to apply to?

- Why are these things important to you?

- Who has influenced the way you have selected colleges?

- Are there any schools you initially thought you would apply to but have since decided not to apply? Why?

Concluding Remarks

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today. I will reach out to you in the next few weeks to schedule our next conversation. In the meantime, if you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out at any time. Thank you again!

Interview 4: Applying

Introductory Remarks

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research project. In the next 30 – 60 minutes, I want to focus on your application process. I will ask some initial questions to prompt your reflection, but please feel free to take our conversation in another direction or to share another story if something else is more important to you. Please also feel free to stop and ask me any questions at any time if you'd like to do so.

Before we begin, I just want to remind you that participation in this project is voluntary, and you can choose to stop this interview at any time or to decline to answer any question. Do you have any questions?

[Pause to answer any participant questions]

If you have any additional questions, please feel free to stop me and ask them at any time during or after our conversation.

Finally, I'd like to record our interview so that I can make sure I capture our conversation accurately. Is it alright with you for me to record this conversation?

Opening Question:

Tell me a little bit about what you are doing to complete college applications.

Prompts:

- What things have you already done on the application? What things do you still need to do?

- What parts of the application process are easy? What parts are more difficult? Why?

- How are you approaching the teacher recommendation portion of the application (if applicable)?

- How are you approaching the essay portion of your applications (if applicable)?

- How have you/are you approaching standardized testing (if applicable)?

- Who has influenced your college application process? (Positively or negatively)

- How are you keeping yourself organized?

Concluding Remarks

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today. I will reach out to you in the next few weeks to schedule our next conversation. In the meantime, if you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out at any time. Thank you again!

Interview 5: Applying

Introductory Remarks

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research project. In the next 30
– 60 minutes, I want to focus on your application process. I will ask some initial
questions to prompt your reflection, but please feel free to take our conversation in
another direction or to share another story if something else is more important to you.
Please also feel free to stop and ask me any questions at any time if you'd like to do so.

Before we begin, I just want to remind you that participation in this project is
voluntary, and you can choose to stop this interview at any time or to decline to answer
any question. Do you have any questions?

[Pause to answer any participant questions]

If you have any additional questions, please feel free to stop me and ask them at
any time during or after our conversation.

Finally, I'd like to record our interview so that I can make sure I capture our
conversation accurately. Is it alright with you for me to record this conversation?

Opening Question:

How are your college applications going?

Prompts:

- What things have you already done on the application? What things do you still
  need to do?

- Walk me through how you completed _____ (part of the application,
  i.e., demographic information, activities section, essay, etc.). How did you
  approach this part of the application?

- What parts of the application process are easy? What parts are more difficult? Why?

- How are you approaching the teacher recommendation portion of the application (if applicable)?

- How are you approaching the essay portion of your applications (if applicable)?

- How have you/are you approaching standardized testing (if applicable)?

- Who has influenced your college application process? (Positively or negatively)

- (For students who have submitted all applications): What would you do differently if you had to apply to colleges again?

Concluding Remarks

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today. I will reach out to you in the next few weeks to schedule our next conversation. In the meantime, if you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out at any time. Thank you again!

Interview 6: Applying & Next Steps

Introductory Remarks

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research project. In the next 30 – 60 minutes, I want to focus on your college process in relation to your experiences with special education and your next steps after finishing your applications. I will ask some initial questions to prompt your reflection, but please feel free to take our conversation in another direction or to share another story if something else is more important to you. Please also feel free to stop and ask me any questions at any time if you'd like to do so.

Before we begin, I just want to remind you that participation in this project is voluntary, and you can choose to stop this interview at any time or to decline to answer any question. Do you have any questions?

[Pause to answer any participant questions]

If you have any additional questions, please feel free to stop me and ask them at any time during or after our conversation.

Finally, I'd like to record our interview so that I can make sure I capture our conversation accurately. Is it alright with you for me to record this conversation?

Opening Question:

How are your college applications going?

Prompts:

- What things have you already done on the application? What things do you still need to do?

- What has been the best part about applying to colleges? What has been the worst part?

- Is there anyone who was especially important in supporting you through the application process? What did they do?

- What would you do differently if you had to apply to colleges again?

- What advice would you give to students who will be applying to college next year?

- Special education-related questions:

    o What does the idea of "disability" mean to you? How does this understanding of disability shape the way you think about school?

    o How have your experiences in special education influenced the way you think about school? The way you think about college?

    o How have your experiences in special education, including any accommodations you receive, impacted your college application process, if at all?

    o How were special educators or special education professionals involved in your college application process, if at all?

- College preparation questions:

    o What are some things that you are going to do to prepare for college?

    o In thinking about preparing for college, what are some things that you would like support on? (Financial aid applications, thinking about academic programs, getting information on disability services on campus, etc.)

Concluding Remarks

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today. This was our last structured conversation about the college process, but I will still be chatting with you in the next few months to make sure that I've accurately described your story. I will reach out to you in the next few weeks to schedule our next conversation. In the meantime, if you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out to me. I really appreciate the time you've spent sharing your college application story with me. Thank you again!