

GEORGIA CANNOT LIVE ON HOPE ALONE: AN EXAMINATION OF STUDENT  
CHOICE AND THE GEORGIA HOPE SCHOLARSHIP AMIDST ECONOMIC  
DECLINE

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Georgia Cannot Live On HOPE Alone: An Examination of Student Choice and the  
Georgia HOPE Scholarship Amidst Economic Decline

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to my loving family, Christopher, and Michelle. Without you, I would not have been able to make it this far.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **GEORGIA CANNOT LIVE ON HOPE ALONE: AN EXAMINATION OF STUDENT CHOICE AND THE GEORGIA HOPE SCHOLARSHIP AMIDST ECONOMIC DECLINE**

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This thesis examined the influence of the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program on student choice to attend or not attend University System of Georgia (USG) institutions. The study focused on the factors that influenced Georgia high school graduates' enrollment decisions as the value of the Georgia HOPE Scholarship lessened with declining Georgia Lottery funding. Using a combination of purposeful and snowball methods of data collection, participants were interviewed for this study. Georgia high school graduates who used the Georgia HOPE Scholarship to attend a USG institution, those who chose to forego their Georgia HOPE Scholarship to attend a different institution, and those who chose not attend an institution of higher education at all were interviewed. Participant responses were examined through the student choice perspective using Laura Perna's (2006) four-layer model incorporating social, economic, and policy context, higher education context, school and community context, and habitus context.

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

A student's final year in high school should be a celebratory time when an admissions deposit is submitted to their first-choice institution, bringing them one step closer to achieving their dreams. Unfortunately, as most educators know, this dream is not always a reality. A large barrier to achieving a college education is often financial constraints and, with higher education costs consistently rising, this barrier has continued to grow for many families (Domina, 2013). To counter this trend, some states created lottery-funded scholarship programs for students who meet each program's statewide criteria (e.g., minimum GPA, minimum standardized test scores, residency status), and who plan to attend an in-state institution (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2012). Adding to the grant and scholarship awards provided by federal aid programs and institution-based need and merit aid programs, state specific, lottery-funded programs allow states to direct talented high school graduates toward state institutions instead of losing high achieving high school seniors to an out-of-state choice or private institution. This keeps a talented workforce within the state (Cornwell, Mustard, & Sridhar, 2006).

As of 2012, eight states consistently used lottery-funded merit scholarship programs, and the programs have a wide array of criteria and benefits. Most notably, Florida's program, which started in 1997, has served the largest number of students (179,076) since its start. Georgia - the first program in the United States starting in 1993 -

has donated the most money to its program, totaling \$539.9 million in the 2011- 2012 academic year (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2012). The goals of such programs are simple: to “attract and retain the best and the brightest students in the state” and to “widen [the] opportunity for higher education by reducing students’ financial burdens” (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2012, p. 5). With such noble goals, states have donated millions of dollars to keep these programs afloat. What then will happen if the number of students seeking lottery-funded aid grows as lottery revenues decrease and tuition prices to state institutions increase? Unfortunately, this is the situation in Georgia, and these changes may affect Georgia’s Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally (HOPE) Scholarship Program and stunt the large increases to enrollment previously seen for University System of Georgia (USG) institutions brought about by the HOPE program (Dynarski, 2000). As this scenario comes to fruition, Georgia state officials have been forced to decrease the amount of aid given to students through HOPE to compensate for rising tuition costs at in-state institutions and an increasing number of students applying for, and receiving, the HOPE scholarship.

### **History of the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program**

In his 1992 Georgia State of the State Address, Governor Zell Miller announced a new initiative allocating lottery revenues to fund “the most all-inclusive scholarship program to be found in any of the 50 states for bright students who would otherwise find it difficult to go to college” (Jecarter4, 2012, n.p.). In his speech, Governor Miller bolstered his argument for the program by sharing statistics regarding Georgia’s graduation rates, stating that only 15 percent of Georgia students were graduating from

college while the national average was 25 percent at the time (Jecarter4, 2012, n.p.). With the goals of improving Georgia's graduation rates and making higher education obtainable for the middle class, the program took shape and quickly became a model program for states across the nation that similarly struggled with improving lower than average college graduation rates. Just five years after the program's inception, Georgia was ranked number one among 50 states in merit-based student financial aid, largely due to HOPE, by the National Association of State Grant and Aid programs (Georgia Student Finance Commission, 2015). By 2012, the HOPE program had become twice as large as the federal Pell Grant program (Cornwell & Mustard, 2002). Many of these rankings were due to the fact that the program had consistently maintained very few barriers for earning the award, with the main criteria set as the achievement of a 3.0 grade point average (GPA) by the completion of senior year at a Georgia high school. In addition, the income cap required to qualify for HOPE, initially set to target low- to middle-income families, was removed early on in the program's creation (Johnson, 2012). These changes contributed to the program's success, but have also led to financial constraints as demand has risen.

### **Changes to HOPE**

Although lottery revenues were readily available and abundant when Miller first proposed the HOPE program, funding has since run out due to an increase in tuition at University System of Georgia (USG) institutions coupled with increasing demand for the HOPE scholarship; changes have been, and will likely continue to be, made to the program to account for the financial difficulties the program is facing. The first change

occurred in 2007, when the Georgia Student Finance Commission began calculating the GPAs of all high school graduates in an effort to standardize the grading process and avoid grade inflation at the high school level (Georgia Student Finance Commission, 2015). This change, although seemingly minimal on the surface, was a warning sign of the financial troubles the program was facing. The Georgia Department of Education, the governing body administering the scholarship, hoped to use this mechanism to decrease the number of HOPE eligible graduates through standardized grading. Without this standardization, “students needed only an 80% average to qualify (using a 60-100 scale). There were, however, problems with this formula; a student could receive four ‘Cs’ and one high ‘A’ from five classes and still qualify for HOPE, earning an 83% average” (Condon, Prince, & Stuckart, 2011, p. 23). The new requirements, which transitioned the program requirement to a 3.0 GPA, would give the student in the above scenario a 2.4 GPA, and the student would be ineligible for the HOPE scholarship. Since the creation of this new standardized grading policy in 2007, approximately 33% fewer students have been eligible for the HOPE scholarship (Condon et al., 2011).

Changes to the Georgia HOPE scholarship requirements did not stop with GPA recalculation. In 2008, the Georgia residency requirement for students increased to 24 months, decreasing the number of HOPE-eligible students, while students not previously eligible through GPA requirements were now eligible if they scored within the 85th percentile on either the SAT or the ACT. The scholarship also became available to students who were homeschooled or successfully completed the General Educational Development (GED) degree (Condon et al., 2011). Although the 2008 changes to the

scholarship both increased and decreased the number of Georgia high school students eligible for the program, these changes highlight the shifting priorities of the scholarship program, as policy leaders changed the focus of the program to limit the number of scholarships awarded to students while providing students of all backgrounds the opportunity for eligibility through standardized test and GED qualifications.

The most recent changes to the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program, made in 2011, were likely a reflection of declining lottery revenues and increased participation in the program as USG tuitions and fees continued to rise. In an effort to keep HOPE financially afloat, Georgia Governor Nathan Deal signed legislation raising academic requirements for the HOPE scholarship to cover all tuition costs (i.e., raising the academic GPA requirement to a 3.7 GPA), eliminating reimbursement for books and mandatory fees, and reducing the amount of the scholarship from 100% to 90% of tuition (Condon et al., 2011). Furthermore, students are now required to pay for any increases made by the USG institution to the cost of tuition, as the amount of scholarship aid awarded in the first year of study will remain constant. Additionally, students whose GPA falls below the required 3.0 at the university level will now only receive one opportunity to regain the scholarship the following semester (Condon et al., 2011).

Finally, the 2011 changes created a sub-scholarship within the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program, the Zell Miller Scholarship, which pays 100 percent of tuition for students graduating from a Georgia high school with a GPA of 3.7 or higher and a minimum score of 1200 on the math and reading sections of the SAT or 26 on the ACT. Additionally, students can qualify for the Zell Miller Scholarship if they graduate with a

3.7 GPA or as valedictorian or salutatorian of their class (Condon et al., 2011). These 2011 changes highlight the growing concern Georgia education officials have regarding the lifespan of lottery revenues in the face of disproportionate increases to both tuition at USG institutions and the number of Georgia graduates likely counting on the HOPE Scholarship Program to fund their path through higher education.

### **Problem Statement**

The challenges faced by the HOPE program are reflected in comparable programs nationwide. Only two state lottery systems have reported growth over the first six years of operation and very few lottery systems have been able to maintain profits after six years (Chen, 2009). Furthermore, since 2000, the cost of state lottery-funded scholarship programs has continued to rise due to increases in tuition at participating institutions and the growing number of college-ready participants meeting scholarship criteria (Lauth & Robbins, 2002). While research has shown a direct link between the availability of the Georgia HOPE Scholarship and similar lottery-funded scholarship programs and increased college access and enrollment (Chen, 2009; Cornwell et al., 2006), what happens when those promised scholarship dollars run out? As noted earlier, the changes made to the Georgia HOPE scholarship in 2011 reduced allotted scholarships from funding 100% of tuition, fees, and books to providing a maximum of 90% of only tuition and fees (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2012) leaving families who were counting on the scholarship to cover the full cost of college attendance scrambling to fill the gap.

Accordingly, this study explored the college-going decisions of Georgia high school graduates using a four layer model (Perna, 2006) that examines student choice based on: social, economic, and policy context; higher education context; school and community context; and habitus context. The model assumes that an individual's decision to attend an institution of higher education is shaped by four contextual layers: (1) the individual's habitus, social knowledge, and value of a college degree; (2) the school and community of which the individual is a part; (3) the higher education institution's context; and (4) and the social, economic, and policy context in the broader public sphere (Perna, 2006). A more in-depth description of Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice is included in Chapter Two.

The research questions guiding this qualitative study were:

- 1) In what ways, if any, have contextual factors shaped the college choice process for Georgia high school graduates who have received a Georgia HOPE scholarship?
- 2) How, if at all, have changes to Georgia HOPE scholarship award amounts affected Georgia HOPE scholarship recipients' decisions to attend or not attend a USG institution?

Particularly, this study examined the extent to which participants' college enrollment behaviors correspond to the four layers of context described by Perna. For example, is there one contextual layer that more strongly affects college choice for students who received the Georgia HOPE scholarship and attended a USG institution, as opposed to students who received the Georgia HOPE scholarship and did not attend a USG

institution? These questions were addressed by interviewing students who received the HOPE scholarship and attended a USG institution, as well as students who received the HOPE scholarship and did not attend a USG institution. Results of the study and a discussion of findings can be found in Chapters Four and Five.

### **Significance of the Study**

As discussed in this chapter, the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program started a trend in higher education that led to the creation of many state-funded lottery scholarship programs after its creation in 1993. The Georgia Lottery-funded Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program was one of the few programs that boasted a high profit in its first two years. Many comparable programs have not seen returns high enough to support a lottery-funded program at all (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2012). This study contributes to what is known about students' college enrollment behaviors in states experiencing a decline in financial support for state lottery-funded programs or those states hoping to initiate a similar program. A better understanding of students' decision-making processes, and the contextual factors that inform those processes, allows stakeholders to evaluate the impact of state-funded scholarship programs. Additionally, my findings illuminate the factors within Perna's (2006) model that drove some students' college choice decisions (e.g., availability of majors in layer three, the use of college counseling programs in layer two), which may inform policymakers whose aim is to increase enrollment in state institutions. Further, policymakers can draw upon the findings of this study when making decisions about future changes to the HOPE program.

To frame this study, I reviewed available literature on the general benefits and shortcomings of merit-based awards in Chapter Two, specifically looking at state-led programs that are completely merit-based. The literature on the specific effects of the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program was then examined, as past research was conducted when the program was fully funded. I also reviewed literature on funding issues associated with the Georgia HOPE Scholarship program, and research on the college choice process. In addition, I explained Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student enrollment behavior. In Chapter Three, I describe the qualitative approach that I used for this study, and I explain my findings in Chapter Four. Finally, in Chapter Five I discuss the ways in which my findings connect to existing research and suggest implications for policy, practice, and research.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Multiple studies have shown that, although financial barriers limit student choice, merit aid programs of differing size, style, and complexity provide a point of access to higher education and lead to increased enrollment among students of diverse socioeconomic and racial backgrounds (Monks, 2009; Scott-Clayton, 2015). The Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program, a merit-based and lottery-funded program, has been no exception and has served as a model program to many other states forming similar scholarship programs since its creation in 1993 (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2012). Over 20 years after the start of the HOPE program, changes to the HOPE program have resulted in many unintentional consequences and research suggests that future changes to the program may have additional effects (Cornwell, Lee, & Mustard, 2005; Cornwell et al., 2006; Dee & Jackson, 1999; Dynarski, 2000; Henry & Rubenstein, 2002; Henry, Rubenstein, & Bugler, 2004).

This study will use a qualitative approach to explore factors that shaped the college choice process of Georgia HOPE recipients. In the following literature review, I examine research on the ways in which financial aid affects the enrollment decisions of students. I begin by looking at the overall effects of merit aid on institutional enrollment generally and enrollment by student type, focusing on what may keep a student from applying for or receiving merit-based awards. Next, I review literature examining HOPE's specific effects on enrollment in Georgia prior to the decline in funding. Specifically, I focus on literature that shows the unintended effects of HOPE on student

academic performance and choice once within a USG classroom. Then, research on economic factors affecting the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program is reviewed to demonstrate the decline in program funding and available scholarship dollars. Finally, I examine the available literature on college choice and explain the theoretical framework for my study, Perna's (2006) model.

### **Effects of Merit Aid**

A direct examination of the effects of merit-based aid on student college choice and enrolment was not conducted until 1999 when Heller (1999) examined the impact of state policy, specifically state grant funds awarded based on a student's merit. Through statistical analysis and comparison of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) enrollment data and tuition pricing surveys, Heller (1999) found a downward sloping demand curve for a student's desire to enroll in a public institution as grant funding decreased. Looking further at specific institutional effects, Heller (1999) found that enrollments at community colleges were more likely to decline with state grant funding decreases when compared to any other institutional type. Other research (Schwartz, 1985) showed that grant funding was the single most effective type of state-supported student financial aid to increase college enrollments when compared to privately funded scholarships and other types of public or private loans. Interestingly, as Heller noted in his 1999 study,

During the two decades covered by this study, the change in wage premium earned by those who attended college compared to those who did not grew substantially. Clearly, even if nothing else changes in the ensuing time period,

students likely understood the increased importance of a college education in the labor markets. (p. 75)

These findings show that students respond to merit-based state grant funding through enrollment decisions, but also respond to the importance of a college degree in potential earnings, which may additionally affect their choice to enroll at an institution of higher education.

In 2009, 10 years after Heller's experiment on the effects of merit-based state financial aid, Monks (2009) examined the effects of institutional merit-based aid programs through a natural experiment conducted at a very selective institution by awarding \$7,000 to randomly selected, high-achieving students who otherwise would not have received any aid. Monks then studied the enrollment outcomes of the group comparing those who received the experimental aid and those who did not. Monks (2009) found that, although the \$7,000 merit-based aid award was effective in increasing enrollments by approximately 10 percent, the effects were relatively inelastic, meaning the enrollment of this high-achieving group would likely remain fairly consistent, regardless of price. Additionally, Monks's findings are in line with those of van der Klaauw (2002) and Avery (2004), who also estimated an inelastic response to tuition pricing and a low percent change in yield rate, or the number of students admitted to an institution divided by the number of students who enroll in classes, due to a \$7,000 scholarship.

The amount of aid awarded in merit-based programs can change the enrollment response rate of students. As Domina (2013) explained, "Programs that guarantee full

tuition to recipients have greater effects on students' high school course-taking and college choice than less generous programs" (p. 1). These findings are not groundbreaking but do support the theory that the "effectiveness of merit aid programs is a function of the amount of aid programs make available" (Domina, 2013, p. 24), which is directly in support of the rational choice theory. This theory, which is the economic rationale and backing of every merit aid program, assumes that individuals will make an economically safe and rational decision when making purchases that will ultimately increase their satisfaction as much as possible (Scott, 2000).

### **Merit Aid Effects by Student Type**

Although the effects of merit aid have proven to be positive, increasing enrollment when awarded to students, these effects are not consistent among students of varying socioeconomic backgrounds (Dynarski, 2000; Heller, 2006). Critics of merit aid programs, specifically state-funded programs like the Georgia HOPE scholarship, believe that the disproportionate distribution of merit aid among students of varying levels of income ultimately nullifies the positive effects on enrollment (Dynarski, 2000; Heller, 2006). For example, in Heller's 2006 study examining the distribution of merit-based aid between income levels through analysis of data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), it was determined that students from higher income families are more likely to receive merit-based aid than those from low income families and traditionally underrepresented populations. Furthermore, the study found that if these same underrepresented and low income families receive merit-based aid, they receive proportionately less than their high-income classmates (Heller, 2006). Ultimately, critics

of state-funded merit aid programs argue that these same merit aid programs do little to address one of the primary goals, which is to close the college participation gaps traditionally seen between high- and low-income families (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Heller, 2006).

### **Barriers to Receiving Merit Aid Benefits**

Just as the amount of financial aid awarded through a merit aid program affects a student's likelihood to enroll, the type of merit aid program affects programs' eligibility requirements and application processes. Specifically, the aid application process has long been studied for complexity and ease of completion and can itself be a barrier to accessing higher education funding (Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, & Sanbonmatsu, 2012; Scott-Clayton, 2015). For example, an experimental study examining the effects of merit aid application assistance on immediate college entry found that college entry rates increased by 24% for high school seniors and 16% among participants with no previous college experience (Bettinger et al., 2012). These findings add to the belief that the design and administration of merit aid programs, not just the amount of aid provided, can drastically change attendance rates and enrollment choice. Findings by Dynarski (2000) and Dynarski and Kreisman (2013) have supported the notion that the complexity of merit-based aid program applications has negative effects on enrollment.

Simple, easy-to-understand eligibility rules increase access to and the amount of merit aid received by participants, as Domina (2013) determined in his study examining the relationship between the design of merit aid programs and student academic achievements. As he wrote, "Programs with relatively simple merit-only eligibility

requirements seem to do more than merit aid programs that require applicants to demonstrate financial need” (Domina, 2013, p. 23).

### **Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program Effects on Enrollment**

Although many states have modeled their lottery-funded scholarship programs on the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program, few have had as much initial success in increasing enrollments and giving talented students the means to stay within the state’s university system. Dynarski (2000) studied the overall effects on enrollment from the beginning of the Georgia HOPE scholarship, looking specifically at the enrollment differences between Black and White students. Through a model developed to adjust for the effects of merit aid based on income levels and the analysis of Current Population Survey (CPS) census data, Dynarski determined that the introduction of the HOPE scholarship allowed students of all economic backgrounds to shift in college choice from two-year institutions to four-year institutions. Further, she found that availability of the HOPE scholarship increased the attendance rate of Georgia’s resident first time first-year students at USG institutions by 7.0 to 7.9 total percentage points (Dynarski, 2000). Dynarski did not, however, find that this increase in college enrollment was universal, and she attributed the Georgia HOPE scholarship with widening the racial gap in college going rates in Georgia (Dynarski 2000). Contrary to Dynarski’s findings, Cornwell et al. (2006) found that HOPE caused a significant 24% jump in Black student enrollment in four-year institutions. This difference can be attributed to a change in the timing of the study, a removal of income caps, and whether or not the estimated effect on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) was taken into account (Wright, 2001).

Echoing Dynarski's findings from 2000 in areas other than the racial divide, Cornwell et al. (2006) found, in a study which compared and contrasted the number of college enrollments before and after the HOPE scholarship began, that "total enrollment was 5.9% higher in Georgia during the 1993-97 period because of the program...[which] translates into an additional 2,889 freshmen per year in Georgia schools" (Cornwell et al., 2006, p. 772). However, the study also noted that this number only accounted for a total of 15% of scholarship recipients for the time period studied and four-year institutions accounted for most of the gain in enrollment (Cornwell et al., 2006). This finding is significant as it shows that, although the HOPE program has been effective in increasing enrollment, there is still work to be done to increase the universal application of the program across student populations and institution types.

### **HOPE Effects on Student Performance and Choice**

Critics of the HOPE program believe that although the program has increased enrollment of high achieving Georgia high school students, it has also led to a decline in educational achievement in higher education institutions (Cornwell et al., 2005; Dee & Jackson, 1999; Henry et al., 2004; Henry & Rubenstein, 2002). A study conducted at the high school level evaluated the academic performance of Georgia's high school students before and after the introduction of the HOPE scholarship, an overall increase in academic quality and achievement for all students was found, with over half of the studied graduating class earning the HOPE scholarship in 1998 (Henry & Rubenstein, 2002). Although these findings are not surprising, as financial rewards for academic achievements are not a new incentive strategy, this does show an increase in academic

preparation of Georgia students at the high school level. Corresponding with this study and largely due to the academic preparation generated by HOPE, it is then no surprise that once at a USG institution HOPE recipients are, in comparison to their non-HOPE classmates, found to take more credit hours a semester, achieve and maintain slightly higher grade point averages (GPAs), and have an increased likelihood to graduate in four years (Henry et al., 2004). Unfortunately, when studied, 70% of this same cohort lost their HOPE eligibility after completing 30 credit hours and ultimately only 13% of HOPE recipients within that cohort maintained their scholarship for their full four years at the university (Henry et al., 2004). Student strategies used to counter this trend of losing the HOPE scholarship, include reducing the number of credits per semester, withdrawing from more courses than their non-HOPE classmates, repeating coursework to obtain a higher grade, and being less likely to enroll in a major in the sciences or technology (Cornwell et al., 2005; Dee & Jackson, 1999).

### **The Georgia Lottery's Decline in Funding**

As noted in the brief history of the HOPE program in Chapter One, Georgia was one of the few lottery programs to boast growth within the first few years of its existence. Unfortunately, this growth has since halted and lottery sales have not kept pace with the growing number of HOPE-eligible graduates. As Perna and Finney (2014) noted in their cross-state analysis of state-funded access programs,

Growth in [Georgia] lottery sales averaged 6.2% annually from 2000 to 2009, and the proceeds to education grew 3% annually over this period. In 2009, however, the proceeds to education increased by only 0.05%. From 2010 to 2011, total

ticket sales declined by 1.3% and education proceeds declined by 4.3%. (p. 64)

These figures show that, soon, the proceeds saved for education through the Georgia Lottery will not likely be able to cover the cost of the rising number of HOPE-eligible high school graduates in Georgia.

The declining funding from the Georgia Lottery for the HOPE scholarship and the steady increase in students eligible for the HOPE scholarship is coupled with declining state funding for higher education in general and the increasing cost of higher education (Lauth & Robbins, 2002; Long, 2004; Perna & Finney, 2014). Tuition and fees across USG institutions have consistently increased since the beginning of the HOPE program and many of these increases have specifically come in the form of student fees, a piece now left out of what is covered by HOPE scholarships (Long, 2004). With a 36% decline in state appropriations for higher education per full-time enrollment (FTE) from 2002 to 2012 (Perna & Finney, 2014) and institutions responding to increased enrollments from HOPE scholarship recipients with a tuition increase of up to 30 cents for every dollar of aid (Long, 2004), the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program is left with a larger gap to close and more eligible students to fund.

Growing concern over the ability of HOPE to continue to fund scholarships at previous levels and overcome the significant deficit created by the program spurred many changes within the program, namely the elimination of funding to cover mandatory fees, student fees, and miscellaneous expenses (such as textbooks) in 2010. From 2009 to 2011, the Lottery Reserve Fund decreased by 40% as funds were used to cover the deficit created by the HOPE Program (Johnson, 2012). These changes and overall decrease in

the amount of aid available to students opens the door to questions about whether the original increase in student performance in high school and increase in enrollment for USG institutions will continue as funding lags.

### **Conceptual Models of Student College Choice**

As funding for the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program continues to decline and the demand for the aid provided through the program grows, stakeholders and policy makers must consider the extent to which financial aid provided through the HOPE program influences student college choice. Indeed, as research shows (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Chapman, 1981; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Perna, 2006), financial aid is just one of many factors that affect students' college choice decision-making process.

Initial research surrounding student college choice theory by Chapman (1981) categorized influencing factors into two large categories: student characteristics and external factors. Student characteristics included a wide variety of factors such as a student's socioeconomic status, aptitude, and expectations of higher education as a whole (Chapman, 1981). The external factors of Chapman's (1981) model included the broad categories of significant persons such as family and friends, fixed college characteristics such as institutional cost and availability of major, and a college's efforts to communicate with students. According to Chapman, these factors both positively and negatively affect a student's perception of a higher education institution and thus influence their decision to enroll or not enroll.

Chapman's (1981) model laid the groundwork for future studies such as Cabrera and La Nasa's (2000) study which broadened Chapman's two categories into a three-

phase process outlining when in a student's lifetime they are most influenced to make college-going decisions. Influences during these three stages overlap with one another as each phase adds, but does not subtract influencing factors, which are both internal student characteristics and external influences (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). According to the study, the first phase of college influence begins in grades seven through nine and includes parental influences (e.g., parental college experience, parental support), student characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status, ability), and the resources and information available to the student (e.g., information provided guidance counselors or other sources) (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). An additional influence during phase two, which takes place during grades 10 through 12, includes the use of institutional marketing materials as a source of information. In phase three, which takes place during grades 11 through 12, students are influenced by perceived institutional characteristics and their perception of their ability to pay for higher education (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000).

To further categorize the factors that influence college choice as noted in previous research (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Chapman, 1981), Perna (2006) developed a conceptual model that divided student college choice factors into four layers: (1) the student's habitus; (2) the school and community of which the individual is a part; (3) the higher education institution's context; and (4) the social, economic, and policy context in the broader public sphere.

The model is a combination of the economic model of human capital investment and the "sociological concepts of habitus, cultural and social capital, and organizational contexts" (Perna, 2006, p. 116). The economic model of human capital investment

highlights an individual's ability to use their current human capital (e.g., their skills, talents, knowledge, personality) to invest in and grow their human capital over time, often through education (Feng, 2013). Further, the human capital investment model proposes that decisions on college choice, including decisions about whether a student should go to college at all, are determined largely based on a cost-benefit analysis of the decision; namely, will the expected benefits of the choice to attend a specific college outweigh the costs associated with that choice (Perna, 2006)? Costs and benefits can be monetary (e.g., foregone earnings, tuition) and nonmonetary (e.g., knowledge gained) but both can influence a student's college-going decision (Perna, 2006). Finally, the human capital investment model also shows how a student's college-going decision can be influenced by students' preparedness for college, or the amount of human capital they possess before they attend college (Perna, 2006). The sociological concepts mentioned above also influence the student's decision to attend college in this way and are integrated throughout the fourth level of Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice.

Similar to student choice theories proposed in Paulsen and St. John's (2002) work that examined the financial nexus between college choice and persistence, Perna's (2006) model also assumes that student college choice is limited by the student's "situated context" in which students are constrained by limited mobility, financial means, and choice. As Paulsen and St. John (2002) outlined, "situated context" allows researchers to better determine which factors contribute to student choice more than others. In a policy context, Paulsen and St. John (2002) acknowledged,

These principles provide a logical basis for conceptualizing new approaches to research on college students that can contribute to an understanding of diversity and how public policy can better acknowledge, value, and promote diversity in higher education. The overarching assumption behind this approach is that it is important to examine how students make situated decisions based on their own, situated circumstance. (p. 192)

Perna's conceptual model of student college choice, illustrated in Figure 1, builds upon Paulsen and St. John's work by categorizing these situated circumstances into layers, in order to better illustrate how factors work together to inform students' decision-making processes.

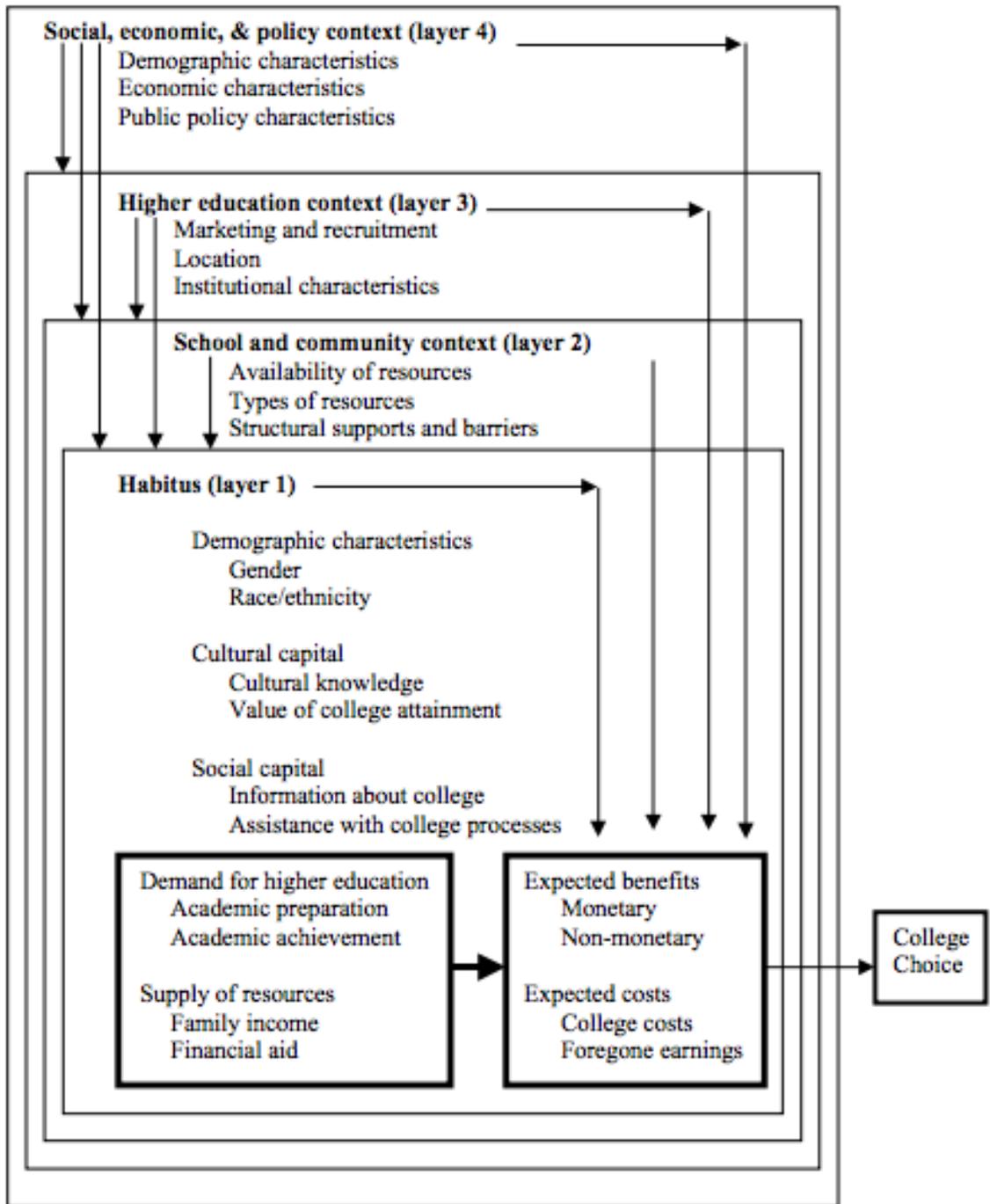


Figure 1: A proposed conceptual model to classify student college going choice and behaviors. Reprinted from “Studying College Access and Choice: A Proposed Conceptual Model,” by L.W. Perna, 2006 in J. C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, pp. 99-157, Springer Netherlands.

At the center of Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice is layer one, the student's habitus, which includes the student's demographic characteristics, value of a college degree, and social knowledge as described, in-depth, in Chapman's (1981) original analysis of the factors influencing college choice. However, Perna (2006) expanded upon Chapman's (1981) analysis by moving beyond a student's ability or drive to achieve a higher education degree and describing how a student's socioeconomic status may influence the information available to the student regarding higher education and their decision to attend an institution in general.

Layer two accounts for the ways in which social and organizational structure may influence a student's college choice, such as the availability of college-going information to a student attending a low-income high school or the limited time a guidance counselor may have to inform first-generation college students of their options for higher education (Perna, 2006). This layer also describes the barriers that students, regardless of ability, may face when attempting to gain knowledge about higher education and access to the resources that can help guide them to a higher education degree.

The next layer Perna (2006) describes, layer three, highlights the role higher education institutions play in college choice for a student. The higher education context layer shows that a higher education institution is a source of knowledge and information for the student, regardless of whether that information is actively or passively distributed. Additionally, higher education institutions influence college choice through institutional characteristics available to students, specifically characteristics "that are consistent with their personal and social identities" (Perna, 2006, p. 118) such as the availability of an

organization supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students if the student applying identifies with or supports that group. Finally, higher education influences student college choice through admissions practices and the open seats available to students seeking enrollment (Perna, 2006).

The final and outermost layer, layer four, describes the social, economic, and policy influences that may affect student choice (Perna, 2006). As noted in Perna (2006) this layer acknowledges the relationship between student college choice and the broader influences policy changes have on student outcomes that have been discussed in previous research completed by Krist and Bracco (2004), Paulsen and St. John (2002), Perna and Titus (2004), Perna, Steele, Woda, and Hibbert, (2005), and St. John and Asker (2001), to name a few. This breadth of research examined the relationship between policy and higher education enrollment, and is particularly relevant to my study as I am interested in how Georgia HOPE policy changes may have influenced students' enrollment decisions.

Perna's (2006) model informed this study as a lens through which to view participants' college decision-making processes. It aided in the analysis of interview data, as I considered the layers of influence that shaped students' college choice decisions. In addition, the model provided a framework for organizing my findings as developed in Chapter Four. Through this framework, I was able to determine which layer of Perna's (2006) conceptual model most influenced student college choice for students who used the Georgia HOPE scholarship to attend a USG institution and those who chose not to attend a USG institution in favor of an out-of-state institution or to not attend college at all.

## **Strengths and Weaknesses of the Literature**

The literature reviewed in this chapter showed that increased financial aid will increase student enrollment while decreased financial aid will decrease student enrollment (Domina, 2013; Heller, 1999; Monks, 2009). Additionally, previous research outlined the effects of the Georgia HOPE scholarship on student performance and enrollment specifically, in particular an increase in enrollment of Georgia high school student in USG institutions, an improvement of the academic performance of Georgia high school students, and a decline in the academic performance of Georgia students at their institutions of choice (Cornwell et al., 2005; Cornwell et al., 2006; Dee & Jackson, 1999; Henry et al., 2004; Henry & Rubenstein, 2002). Additionally, the literature reviewed in this chapter showed how the connection of financial aid and financial constraints affect student choice through a student's socioeconomic status and the financial policies affecting the student.

However, although the literature noted that the funds for the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program are declining, there is no discussion in the literature, presently, that describes the effects the declining Georgia Lottery funds may have on Georgia HOPE scholarship program recipients. Additionally, there is no research that examines the specific influence the Georgia HOPE scholarship may have on student choice. With this study, therefore, I explored how, if at all, declining HOPE scholarship funds for the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program affected the college choices of Georgia high school students who received the scholarship, as well as the ways in which other factors – as

outlined in Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice –influenced participants' college-going decisions.

### **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

Previous studies have examined the vast net of effects created by the Georgia HOPE scholarship. Research shows that the HOPE program has drastically increased enrollments at USG institutions (Cornwell et al., 2006; Dynarski, 2000), changed the academic patterns of high school students (Henry & Rubenstein, 2002), and increased academic performance of scholarship recipients once at their selected institution (Henry et al., 2004).

However, as demand for the Georgia HOPE scholarship continues to grow, and the fiscal amount students will benefit from the award declines, students are left with a choice between institutions that their Georgia high school graduate predecessors may not have had. As HOPE award amounts decrease, will some students choose to forego their award through the HOPE program and enroll at a private or out-of-state institution, or no institution at all, or will the benefits of the tuition still covered through the HOPE program outweigh the other factors influencing their decisions? The effects of such a decision may vary by institution type as students begin a cost-benefit analysis based on institutional profile and the relative cost of their education as the HOPE scholarship decreases. To investigate this assumption, I explored the factors influencing student college choice through interviews with Georgia high school graduates who qualified for the HOPE scholarship and used, or did not use, the Georgia HOPE scholarship to fund their higher educations. The research questions guiding this qualitative study were:

- 1) In what ways, if any, do contextual factors shape college choice for Georgia high school graduates who have received a Georgia HOPE scholarship?
- 2) How, if at all, have changes to Georgia HOPE scholarship award amounts affected Georgia HOPE scholarship recipients' decision to attend or not attend a USG institution?

Additionally, the study examined the extent to which participants' college enrollment behaviors corresponded to the four layers of context described by Perna (2006) and outlined in the literature review of this report. For example, I explored whether one contextual layer more strongly influenced college choice for students who received the Georgia HOPE scholarship and attended a USG institution, as opposed to students who received the Georgia HOPE scholarship and did not attend a USG institution.

Additionally, the study examined which conceptual layer more strongly influenced students who received the Georgia HOPE scholarship when it covered all USG institution tuition versus students who completed their college choice decision when the HOPE scholarship only covered 90 percent of tuition. I addressed these questions by interviewing students who received the HOPE scholarship and attended a USG institution, as well as students who received the HOPE scholarship and did not attend a USG institution.

For this study, I elected to use a qualitative approach to offer insight into these questions. Because my research questions centered on students' experiences and their perception of the Georgia HOPE scholarship, a qualitative study allowed me to best analyze student experiences. This approach also enabled me to begin to understand why

students decided to attend their college of choice and how this choice fit within Perna's (2006) conceptual model.

Further, I analyzed interview data through an interpretive, constructivist paradigm. This combined paradigm allowed me to interpret each student's experience knowing that individuals interpret experiences in different ways and that this may change the responses participants give during interviews. The interpretive approach allowed me to acknowledge that "individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds" and understand "the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). Additionally, as noted in Guba and Lincoln (1994), the constructivist paradigm acknowledges that a participant's responses are informed by their own realities and, while no reality is more correct than another, each reality is alterable by the individual's experiences. This view and understanding of each participant's experiences allowed me to interpret the participants' college choice decisions in a way that was unique for each participant.

### **Sampling Strategy**

To obtain data from students who attended and did not attend a USG institution after receiving the Georgia HOPE scholarship, a combination of convenience, purposeful and snowball sampling was used in this study. Initially, I reached out to five people I know who received the Georgia HOPE scholarship, two of whom used the scholarship to attend a USG institution and three who did not. Of these five students, four responded to my request and agreed to take part in interviews. Additionally, members of my thesis committee referred me to two prospective participants, neither of whom attended a USG

institution. Both of these participants accepted my invitation to take part in an interview. In addition, one of these participants provided me with contact information for three additional participants, all of whom took part in interviews.

This sampling strategy allowed me to recruit a total of nine Georgia HOPE scholarship recipients, including representatives of the “hidden population” of HOPE recipients who did not use the scholarship, who I would not otherwise have been able to identify.

### **Participants**

Of the nine participants I interviewed, six were female (Emma, Olivia, Alexis, Samantha, Molly, and Kellie) and three were male (Charles, Aaron, and Noah). Aaron, Molly, Kellie, and Noah used the Georgia HOPE scholarship to attend a USG institution, while Emma, Olivia, Alexis and Samantha attended an out-of-state institution after receiving the HOPE scholarship. Charles delayed enrolling in college and first enlisted in the military after graduating from high school. He later went on to attend an out-of-state institution after serving in the military for eight years and did not use the Georgia HOPE scholarship. Of the participants who attended out-of-state institutions, Alexis is currently enrolled at a large, mid-Atlantic public institution, Institution C. Of the remaining three out-of-state participants, Emma and Olivia attended a mid-size, public, mid-Atlantic institution (Institution D) and Samantha attended a small, public mid-Atlantic institution, Institution E.

Of participants who chose to attend a USG institution, Aaron, Molly, and Noah attended a large, public, science and technology institution (Institution A) while Kellie

attended a large public institution in Georgia (Institution B). A summary of the higher education institutions participants attended can be found in Appendix A. Additionally, the institutional characteristics of the institutions participants attended can be found in Appendix D.

Of additional importance to this study are the high schools that each participant attended since, in Perna's (2006) conceptual model, the availability of resources in high school can affect student college choice, including the choice to not attend college. My sample for this study included four participants who attended private high schools (Olivia, Samantha, Molly, and Noah) and five participants who attended public high schools (Emma, Alexis, Charles, Aaron, and Kellie). Additionally, the years participants graduated from high school determined the amount of funding they would have received from the Georgia HOPE scholarship, due to HOPE policy changes. Information about the participants' high schools can be found in Appendix B and C while participants' high school and college graduation years can be found in Appendix B.

Of the four participants who attended a private high school, Samantha, Molly, and Noah attended Private School A, a private, college-preparatory school located south of Atlanta. Private School A ranked in the top 10 private high schools in the state and in the top 10 for college readiness of graduates (out of the 132 private colleges in Georgia) (Niche, 2017). In addition, Olivia attended Private School B, a private high school located in north Atlanta, ranked as one of the top five private high schools in the state and in the top 10 for college readiness within the state (Niche, 2017). A summary of participants' private high school rankings can be found in Appendix B.

Of the five participants who attended a public high school, Emma attended Public School A, located in a northern suburb of Atlanta. Public School A is ranked in the top 140 of 426 public high schools in Georgia and in the top 100 for college readiness of high school graduates (Niche, 2017). Kellie attended Public School B, ranked as one of the top 20 best public high schools in Georgia and in the top 30 for college readiness of high school graduates in Georgia (Niche, 2017). Another participant who attended a public high school was Aaron, who attended Public School C. Public School C is located in a north Atlanta suburb and ranked as one of the top 50 best high schools in Georgia (Niche, 2017). Additional participants who attended public high schools include Alexis who attended Public School D and Charles, who attended Public School E. Public School D is an Atlanta suburban high school, ranked in the top 100 best public schools and the top 100 for the college readiness its graduates. Public School E is a rural, southern Georgia high school, ranked in the top 130 best public school in the state and in the top 150 for the college readiness of high school graduates (Niche, 2017). A summary of participants' public high school rankings can be found in Appendix C.

As mentioned above, due to changes in Georgia HOPE scholarship policies, the year participants graduated from high school affected Georgia HOPE scholarship benefits for which they were eligible. Samantha, Charles, Aaron, Molly, Kellie, and Noah completed their college-choice decisions before the 2011 changes to the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program reduced scholarship dollars from full tuition to 90 percent of tuition. Emma and Alexis completed their college-choice processes after changes were made to the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program while Olivia completed her college-choice

process in 2010, while changes to the HOPE scholarship program were proposed but not yet instated. The high school and graduation years of the study participants can be found in Appendix A.

### **Data Collection**

Data for this study was collected through one hour, individual interviews using one of two interview protocols. Follow-up questions were based on participant responses. A complete list of interview questions and possible follow-up questions is included in Appendix A.

Interviews began with questions that helped me understand the background of each participant. The purpose of this section of the interview was to learn more about the habitus of each student, as described in layer one of Perna's (2006) model. Questions included, "Where did you grow up?" and "What is the educational background of your parents?". Next, I asked participants to describe the factors that they believed most influenced their college choice decisions, through questions that inquired about the information sources and supports that led them to their college choice. Questions in this section included, "Who provided you with information regarding the Georgia HOPE scholarship (e.g., parents, guidance counselors, schools that accepted the scholarship)?". Additionally in this section, participants who used a Georgia HOPE scholarship to attend a USG institution were asked, "In what way, if at all, did the HOPE scholarship influence your decision to attend your institution?". Questions within this section included, "What factors, if any, do you believe would have influenced you to attend an out of state institution and forego the HOPE scholarship award you received?". This line of

questioning helped me to gather information regarding the Georgia HOPE scholarship's influence on participants' college choices.

Seven participant interviews were conducted in-person in a private meeting room at the George Mason University library and two interviews were conducted via video call, also in a private meeting room at the George Mason University library, to ensure confidentiality of the participants. Each interview was digitally recorded using a recording application on a cell phone as well as a voice recorder application on a laptop computer. After the completion of each interview, recordings were transcribed verbatim. All interview recordings were safely stored during data analysis and were permanently deleted once they had been transcribed.

### **Data Analysis**

As noted above, this study utilized an interpretive constructivist paradigm to focus data analysis. The use of this paradigm allowed me to make meaning of participant data through the interpretation of their unique experiences, acknowledging that there are multiple, but equally valid, realities for participants with respect to their college choice processes. As outlined in Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2013), researchers using a constructivist approach to research hold a responsibility to tell each participant's story fully to ensure that the ethical integrity of the study is maintained. I therefore strived to reconstruct participants' realities in order to understand each of their experiences. My findings on participants' experiences are described in Chapter Four.

Data was analyzed to interpret the research participants' experiences in an effort to understand the actions they took; in this case, the actions of attending or not attending

a USG institution and using or not using the Georgia HOPE scholarship. After interviews were transcribed, I reviewed and coded each interview transcript, by hand, for general themes using Perna's (2006) model as a guide. I began by highlighting participants' responses that showed a broad use or application of one of the four layers in Perna's (2006) model: (1) the student's habitus; (2) the school and community of which the individual is a part; (3) the higher education institution's context; and (4) the social, economic, and policy context in the broader public sphere. I noted the extent to which model elements influenced students' college choices and coded to reflect this influence on their college choice. For example, if a participant mentioned that the money their parents had saved for college allowed them to apply to and consider out-of-state institutions, this was coded for the first layer, habitus.

Once I had applied the broad layers of Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice to the data, I then reviewed each transcript again to assign sub-codes in order to identify further factors that influenced participants' college choice decisions. These sub-codes reflected specific parts of each layer that influenced each participant's college choice such as college knowledge and the participants' finances (layer one), the availability of resources and the supports or barriers the within the participants' high schools (layer two), the marketing materials distributed by higher education institutions and institutional characteristics (layer three), and the broad economic and public policy characteristics that influenced participants' college choice decisions (layer four). Returning to the example in the previous paragraph, some participants shared that their parents had saved money for college, enabling them to forego the HOPE scholarship and

attend an institution located outside of Georgia. Within the larger code of layer one, habitus, I sub-coded this data as “availability of resources,” since it described the financial resources available to participants. The coded data guided the writing of my findings.

### **Trustworthiness**

As outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), there are several ways in which I worked to ensure trustworthiness during and after the process of data collection and data analysis. First, to ensure confirmability, I have outlined the methods and procedures used in the research process in an effort to allow replicability of the research in further reports. I also aimed to produce work that is “context-rich and meaningful” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 279) through the creation of text that accurately reflects the meaning of participant responses and their constructed realities. In addition, I engaged in member checking by distributing my preliminary findings to study participants, and giving them the opportunity to comment on the themes that I had identified. Knowing that all individuals interpret situations from their own point of view (Creswell, 2014), asking participants to review and provide feedback on a draft of my findings helped ensure authenticity in evaluation. Any comments or changes that participants offered were incorporated into my final report.

Finally, trustworthiness was ensured through the use of Perna’s (2006) model as a guide for data analysis and interpretation. Use of Perna’s (2006) model in this way helped me connect the findings in this research to an external piece of literature, providing credibility and authenticity as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994).

## **Researcher as Instrument Statement**

In addition to the strategies I used to ensure trustworthiness that are outlined above, I describe here my professional and educational background and experiences that informed my approach to this research. I am pursuing a Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies at George Mason University (GMU) with a specialization in higher education administration. During the last seven years, I have worked in higher education in several capacities including as a student tour guide and student admissions office worker at the University of Delaware. After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Delaware, I began work in a professional capacity in the Office of Undergraduate Admissions at GMU. It was during my time in the GMU admissions office that I first learned of the HOPE program, as Georgia students who GMU sought to recruit were turning down admissions offers and scholarship offers to attend USG institutions. Through my time recruiting students from Georgia high schools, I became acutely interested in the factors that may contribute to a student who has received a Georgia HOPE scholarship giving up their scholarship to come to an out-of-state institution like GMU.

Additionally, I have personal connections to the HOPE program as two first cousins graduated from a Georgia high school and proceeded to receive and use the HOPE scholarship to attend a USG institution, Georgia Southern University. Directly aligned with previous research regarding the loss of the HOPE scholarships for students (Henry et al., 2004), both cousins who had the opportunity to use the HOPE scholarship lost their scholarship before they completed their degrees.

In addition to these personal connections to the HOPE program, my work as an admissions counselor for GMU provided me professional connections to the scholarship with first-hand experience regarding student college choice in Georgia. As the main evaluator of applications from Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee, I was able to see some of the main factors influencing student college choice, specifically, outreach of the institution, financial aid availability, and the resources available to students through their high schools and communities. This combination of professional and personal experience equipped me with a desire to study student college choice, specifically the effects of the HOPE scholarship on college enrollment. Additionally, this combination of experience and professional knowledge likely informed my analysis and interpretation of study data.

### **Limitations**

As with all research that includes snowball sampling as a part of its sampling strategy, a limitation of this study was the lack of control over the sample population, as initial subjects influenced the selection of further subjects. In addition, due to my sampling strategy and this study's small sample size, I was not able to control for institutional, socioeconomic, or demographic diversity among participants. For example, the four participants who attended a private high school all attended the same high school (Public School A) and the four participants who attended a USG institution attended only two of the 30 USG institutions (Institutions A and B). My findings on in-state participants thus only reflect the decision to attend two of the top-tier, academically rigorous, and selective USG institutions.

In addition, I did not recruit participants based on their year of high school graduation. Interviewing participants who ranged in age thus created a limitation for this study, as six participants made their college choice decisions prior to the 2011 changes to the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program. Additionally, participants who completed their college choice decisions more recently (i.e., the participant who is currently enrolled in college and the participants who completed their college choice processes in the last seven years) might have had a more accurate recollection of the college choice process.

Of the study participants, all those who most recently completed their college choice processes enrolled in out-of-state institutions and all of the participants who enrolled in USG institutions completed their college choice processes prior to the 2011 changes to the funding structure of the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program. Although this fact is discussed further in Chapters Four and Five, it is important to note that none of the participants who completed their college choice processes after the 2011 changes to the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program enrolled in USG institutions. This is a limitation of the study as it eliminates the possibility of comparing USG enrollment decisions after the 2011 scholarship changes. However, additional factors that contributed to enrollment decisions and the use of the Georgia HOPE scholarship are discussed in Chapters Four and Five.

### **Strengths**

In spite of these limitations, my sampling strategy allowed me to gain insight from a population that may not have been accessible otherwise. Because Georgia HOPE recipients are not individually identifiable through publicly available Georgia Department

of Education data, and the time constraints of this study did not allow me to widely advertise my study at Georgia institutions, personal connections and referrals enabled me to reach students who received the Georgia HOPE scholarship and chose not to use it.

Further, although the graduation years of study participants limited my ability to fully explore the implications of 2011 changes on USG enrollment decisions, I was able to examine participants' perceptions of the HOPE scholarship changes. This added breadth to my findings and the overarching application of the study.

As noted in the review of available literature, the majority of research on the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program is quantitative in nature and occurred before the 2011 changes to the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program. Currently there are no qualitative studies examining the college choice decisions of Georgia HOPE scholarship recipients. There was, therefore, a gap in the literature and a need for a study like mine examining the after-effects of the scholarship changes. Indeed, the qualitative approach that I employed for this research is a strength of my study, as it provided insight into the college choice processes of students who received the Georgia HOPE scholarship relative to their socially constructed realities.

In the following chapter, I discuss my findings on participants' college choice processes. In Chapter 5, I describe how these findings relate to existing research, outline implications for policy and practice, and recommend areas for future research.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this research was to determine what factors influence student college choice for graduates of Georgia high schools who have received the Georgia HOPE scholarship. The Georgia HOPE scholarship is a GPA-based scholarship that was recently reduced from covering 100 percent of tuition, book expenses, and college fees to only covering 90 percent of tuition at Georgia institutions due to declining Georgia Lottery revenues which fund the Georgia HOPE scholarship. The research questions which informed this study were:

- 1) In what ways, if any, have contextual factors shaped the college choice process for Georgia high school graduates who have received a Georgia HOPE scholarship?
- 2) How, if at all, have changes to Georgia HOPE scholarship award amounts affected Georgia HOPE scholarship recipients' decisions to attend or not attend a USG institution?

This research was informed by Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student choice, which includes four layers: (1) the student's habitus, social knowledge and the understanding of the value of a college degree; (2) the school and community of which the individual is a part; (3) the higher education institution's context and qualities; and (4) the social, economic, and policy context in the broader public sphere.

Through in-depth interviews, study participants described their college choice processes, outlining the factors that led them to use, or not use, the Georgia HOPE

scholarship to attend their colleges of choice. Students discussed their decisions to attend either USG institutions where they could use the scholarship or out-of-state institutions where they were unable to use the HOPE scholarship.

An interpretive, constructivist framework was used to analyze interview data, with the aim of interpreting each participant's unique reality that shaped their college choice process. Perna's (2006) conceptual model was also used to guide my analysis of interview data. The findings presented in this chapter reflect this interpretive and constructivist approach, as well as the theoretical model, as I balanced description and analysis to achieve an interpretation of each participant's experiences.

### **Study Findings**

The findings described in this chapter are presented in the order of the layers of Perna's (2006) model, beginning with layer one, or the habitus of each student, and layer two, the influence of the students' experiences in their high schools and communities. The chapter concludes with a discussion of findings associated with layer three, the influence of the higher education institution on college choice, and layer four, the influence of economic and public policies on participant college choice. Within the fourth layer, special attention is paid to the effect of the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program as a policy, and the ways in which this policy influenced the participants' college choices. Within each layer, several themes emerged; these themes are discussed in each of the sections below.

## **The Influence of Habitus on Student College Choice**

For participants in this study, habitus was the most influential layer of Perna's (2006) model that shaped their decision-making related to college choice. Habitus, which includes the student's demographic characteristics, the student's understanding of the value of a college degree, and knowledge of the college selection process (i.e., college knowledge), encompasses the ways in which these students' socialization and socioeconomic status influenced their choice process. The habitus layer affected these students through the information available to them in the form of parental and guardian expectations regarding their college choice process and the knowledge their family was able to share with them about the college choice and college-going processes. The habitus layer, specifically family expectations and knowledge about the college process, affected the college choice process of almost all of the participants. Family expectations regarding college attendance influenced all of the participants who choose to forego the Georgia HOPE scholarship. In addition, among these same participants, almost all were supported by a social circle that was experienced in the college choice process.

**Value of college education.** The value of a college education and the knowledge a student possesses about the college choice process emerged as two major sub-themes within the habitus layer. For example, all but three participants reported that their family's values and expectations with respect to the necessity of going to college influenced their college choice processes and their drive to go to college. The value participants' families placed on obtaining a college education emerged from interview

data as both an understanding that students possessed at the start of their college choice process and an external influence as family members, most often parents, instilled in their students the value of a college education.

All of the students who decided to forego the Georgia HOPE scholarship and attend an out-of-state institution were influenced by their belief that going to college would benefit them. For example, Emma, a public high school student who attended Institution D, described always knowing she needed to attend an institution of higher education. As she explained, “I always really liked school so it was a no-brainer for me...it was just like, in my mind, I wanted to go to college. It was important for me.” Similarly, Alexis, a public high school graduate who attends a large, out-of-state institution, weighed her decision of which institution to attend based on her understanding of the benefits she would receive with a college degree, such as higher paying positions. Alexis said that she ultimately separated her college choices “between what I wanted to get out of [college], because at the end of the day I wanted a job and so I had to be realistic about four years.” Further, Molly, a private high school graduate who attended Institution A, shared that “going to college was always kind of on the back of my mind.” She said that she understood that she needed to go to college in order to succeed.

While Alexis, Emma, and Molly shared that they had internalized an understanding that they needed to attend college, participants more commonly said that this understanding was communicated to them by others, specifically their parents. Olivia, who graduated from a private high school, Institution D, explained that it was

always expected for her to go to college in her family and that her parents consistently reinforced the knowledge that college would be beneficial for her: She stated, “It was one of those things where it’s just not an option to not go to college in my house.” Further, Olivia internalized the belief that her parents projected, that college is primarily to get a job. She also shared that, “hearing how students were doing after college, if they were getting [work] placement” during a meeting with an Institution D professional in her field of choice helped her understand the value of a college degree and the increase in earnings she would receive if she completed her degree and secured a job. Alexis also shared that a consideration of post-college outcomes was part of her college choice process.

However, Alexis was encouraged to consider such outcomes by her mother. As she explained, her mother encouraged her to apply to colleges outside of Georgia because she was concerned that the economic climate of Georgia might have limited Alexis’s job prospects after college.

Charles, a public high school graduate, was the only participant who shared that the value of a college degree was not communicated to him growing up. Charles said that his grandmother, his legal guardian, told him that college was not the correct choice for him. As he explained, “[My grandmother] didn’t see me as being mentally or emotionally ready or stable to actually do a good job in college.” Charles continued, “As much as it pains me to say, I think [my grandmother] would have been correct.” Charles internalized the idea that there was no value in pursuing a college degree for him, and he therefore did not consider college after high school. Instead, he enlisted in the military for eight years.

As Perna (2006) noted, a student must possess the knowledge that the benefits of completing a college degree will outweigh the foregone earnings and costs of obtaining a college degree. This was shown in my findings as participants reported an understanding that their college degree would produce an outcome of a higher paying job. Further, participants were largely influenced by their parents' beliefs that a college degree is necessary for success later in life.

**Information about college.** College knowledge refers to information a student has about college (e.g., the application process, financial aid information) and academic knowledge the student must have to succeed in college (e.g., remedial math knowledge, English skills) (Conley, 2005). Information about the college selection process that students receive, as well as the help students receive when applying to higher education institutions, can influence their college choice and the ease of the college selection process. College knowledge can also include the knowledge students' families possess about the college selection process and the application of that knowledge to the college choice process. For the participants in this study, all but two acquired knowledge about college when they were growing up from their parents, as well as from high school personnel.

The two participants who did not acquire knowledge about the college application process or college in general were Emma and Charles. Charles, discussed in the previous section, shared that he did not have family members who were able to help him with the college application process. As he explained, "not having anyone in my family who had gone to college before, no one knew how to guide me." Emma shared that her family

was also unable to provide her with knowledge about college or to assist her in the application or college selection process. As she explained:

I felt like everyone else around me had parents that made them get good grades and wanted them to become lawyers and doctors and had a vision for them and took them to the [standardized] tests and took them to tutoring. I felt like I did a lot of it by myself.

Emma's father did not attend college after receiving his GED and her mother did not complete her bachelor's- degree until Emma was already in college. However, unlike Charles, Emma acquired knowledge about college from sources beyond her family because she always knew she wanted to attend college, and she ultimately applied to and enrolled in college because of that outside assistance in the college process. Charles did not have any such outside assistance.

Kellie shared that while her parents were supportive as she explored college options and sought out information about colleges, she felt that they were unable to provide her with guidance throughout her college choice process. Kellie said that she regretted not applying to more rigorous colleges, and thought that she might have done so if she had been better informed about her options. As she explained, "I was a really good student, but my parents were both the first generation to go to college [in their families]. So they didn't even know like, 'That's a really good school.' So I don't think they pushed me." Kellie was the only participant who indicated that her parents were first-generation students while Emma and Charles were the only participants with parents or guardians who had not attended college before their college selection process.

In contrast to participants who described a lack of college knowledge, seven participants identified various ways that they obtained college knowledge throughout their college selection process. For example, Aaron, a public high school and Institution A graduate, described the positive role his mother played in his college choice process. His mother, he shared, was “really trying to push me and she helped me put my application together for [Institution A].” Similarly, Noah, who attended a private high school and Institution A, remembered learning about colleges and the college process with his parents after moving to Georgia from Canada. As he explained, “We spent a year just educating ourselves about how to apply to college and what admissions officers consider and look for...because my parents had no background [in US colleges].”

Similarly, Alexis and Samantha, both of whom attended colleges outside of Georgia, recalled their parents driving them to visit each college they had applied to, no matter how far away the institution was located. On her visit to Institution C, where she eventually enrolled, Alexis said that she and her mother “drove 10 hours in a car to come [to Institution C] and I didn’t even want to go [to Institution C].” Alexis continued that her mother forced her to attend an open house event at Institution C, which swayed Alexis’s opinion about the institution. Similarly, after Samantha’s older brother transferred out of the institution he first enrolled in because he felt the college was not a good fit for him, her parents, she said, “made me spend the night at every college I looked at” to ensure the same thing did not happen to her after enrolling.

The vast majority of study participants were influenced by the knowledge of the college selection process their families possessed. Of the participants who said they had

a lack of knowledge of the college selection process, each was supported by parents or guardians who either did not attend college, attended college after the participant had completed their college selection process, or did not possess enough information about the college selection process to assist the participant. Participants who chose to stay in-state and participants who chose to attend college out-of-state were similarly affected by the level of knowledge they or their guardians had about the college process or the information they were willing to seek about the college selection process.

**Supply of resources.** Very few participants directly recalled that the availability of financial resources (e.g., family income, savings for college) influenced their college choice. However, of those who discussed having an awareness of financial resource availability, there was a clear divide in the data between students who attended a USG institution with the Georgia HOPE scholarship and those who attended an out-of-state institution. Specifically, participants who attended an out-of-state institution recalled knowing that their parents would be able to afford an out-of-state institution if they chose to forego the Georgia HOPE scholarship.

Samantha, for example, relayed an appreciation for the financial support her parents were able to provide, saying,

My parents are hugely supportive and the reason why I was able to go to school out of state was because they could afford to finance that, I didn't have to be limited to a public in-state school where I could have the cheaper tuition or utilize the HOPE scholarship.

Additionally, Samantha noted that she never questioned whether her parents would have been able to fund an out-of-state degree because her older brother also went out of state for school. Because Samantha had witnessed the ease of her brother's attendance at his out-of-state school, she noted, "it was sort of a precedent. If he could go out-of-state then I could too." Similarly, Olivia mentioned knowing from the beginning of her college choice process that her parents would fund her degree. As she explained, "I was fortunate enough to have my parents pay for school for me. They said, 'We'll give you four years. That's our responsibility as your parents, so you have four years. Anything after that, you pay on your own.'" Although Olivia's parents asked her to "try and be respectful of the cost" when choosing a college, they ensured her they would cover the tuition for an out-of-state college if that was where she wanted to go. Outside of knowing their parents could financially support their attendance at an out-of-state school, many of the participants who attended out-of-state schools knew, early in their college choice process, that their parents were financially comfortable with the decision to attend college out-of-state. Indeed, these participants said that their parents told them that they had sufficient savings to afford the participants' colleges of choice without needing to forgo their own comforts and or make personal sacrifices.

In contrast, Kellie shared that although her parents were supportive of her attending her choice of school, within or outside of Georgia, she was acutely aware that her family's finances were limited. As she explained, "We didn't have a ton of money. I wouldn't say that my parents wouldn't have supported me going out-of-state...but it was something that I was aware of, that it was a lot more expensive." Kellie described the

availability of financial resources in her family as the biggest factor and barrier in her college choice process. Ultimately, she said, she could not justify the cost of an out-of-state school when she had the opportunity to use the Georgia HOPE scholarship; she eventually attended Institution B. Similarly, Noah noted that he was also aware of his family's financial situation and said that, if he had exceeded his parents' savings, he would have needed to cover the difference himself. Noah noted that he had the conversation with his parents about financial savings "pretty early on" and that the financial aspect of his college decision "was always an immediate consideration." He said:

I think I knew how much money [my family] had. How much money, depending on if I went to a school that was beyond our, my parents' savings, that I would have to make up for it so that was part of the conversation throughout [my college choice process].

Likewise, Charles said that his decision to enlist in the military after he graduated from high school was tied not only to a lack of support, encouragement, and college knowledge, but also to his family's limited financial resources. Charles said the lack of financial options and knowledge of those options was a deciding factor in his decision to forego the Georgia HOPE scholarship and enlist. He shared, "I knew [Georgia HOPE] didn't pay for [everything]. What am I going to do? Work at a local Subway? Would that cover it? I didn't know." Charles was ultimately extremely concerned that he would not be able to afford living expenses (e.g., food, a rental property) if he were to go to

college even if he used the Georgia HOPE scholarship. Because of this, Charles decided to forego the scholarship, and college as a whole, and enlist in the military.

The availability of economic resources and the knowledge of those resources thus directly influenced the college choice processes of some participants. While participants who attended out-of-state institutions were informed, early in their college choice processes, that their parents were able to fund their college educations regardless of institution cost or location, in-state, USG attendees either did not have that same conversation with their families or were informed that family resources were not available to cover most out-of-state expenses. Similarly, the perceptions of and use of high school resources, as well as the availability of such resources, also influenced in-state and out-of-state students differently.

### **The Influence of High School Resources on Student College Choice**

As described in Chapter 3, participants attended a variety of public and private high schools, and these schools varied in terms of resource level. I found that students' perceptions of the resources available to them through their high schools were an important factor in their college choice processes. This finding aligns with layer two of Perna's (2006) conceptual model, which outlines the influence of the availability of resources and structural support in students' high schools and communities during the college choice process. The following discussion of high school and community resources reveals how participants perceived the resources available to them, while taking into consideration information about participants' high schools available through the Niche database.

**Availability of high school resources.** All of the students who attended an out-of-state institution immediately after high school graduation experienced positive interactions with high school staff (e.g., teachers, college counselors, guidance counselors). For example, Emma, whose high school is ranked in the top 130 of public schools in the state, described a program built in to her high school curriculum which, she explained, allowed students to “take out time from our days to research universities around the country...[The counselors] pushed having us do a lot of research to get into a school that was really good and appropriate for us.” As discussed earlier, Emma did not obtain college knowledge from her family. However, she noted that the support she received through her high school compensated for the lack of support she received at home. As she shared, “I felt like through [the college counselors] I knew more how to [apply to college]. I didn’t really have a lot of help from home.”

Olivia, whose family also did not provide her with college knowledge, described a similar dedication to the college choice process in her high school. Olivia attended the most highly ranked high school of the schools attended by participants in this study, Private School B. Olivia remembered a guidance counselor who, she said, was “instrumental in making sure I had...all my ducks in a row when it came to admissions, when it came to SATs.” Olivia also described a guidance counselor who knew her likes and dislikes. She said that when she could not find a college she particularly liked, her guidance counselor “would point me in another direction and say, ‘Take a look at this [other school.]’...If [the guidance counselor] didn’t know something, she would connect you with someone who did.”

Likewise, Samantha, one of the three participants who attended Private School A, a top ranked private school, described an abundance of college resources that were available within her high school. Samantha described several encounters with her college counselor that were similar to the experiences of Emma and Olivia. Samantha shared that a guidance counselor helped her form the list of colleges that she applied to. The guidance counselor, she said, suggested including “a safety school, a school that I [could] get into...higher up than a safety school, and then a stretch school.” Without the help of her college counselor, Samantha said, she would not have put Institution E, where she eventually enrolled, on her list of colleges to apply to. As she explained, “[In] my first meeting with the new [college counselor], he was asking me which schools I was looking at, and since I had mentioned a couple [schools] in [mid-Atlantic state] he said, ‘Well, what about [Institution E]?,’ which I’d never even heard of. That got put on my list of ‘let’s go visit.’”

In contrast to the experiences described by Emma, Olivia, and Samantha, Charles described limited college resources at his high school. Charles went to Public School E, the lowest ranked high school among those attended by participants in this study in terms of the college readiness of graduates (i.e., top 150 of 426 Georgia high schools). Charles shared that although there were guidance counselors and college resources available at his high school, he felt that these resources were reserved for those he characterized as “golden children” within his high school, or the high achieving students who were valedictorian or salutatorian. Although Charles qualified for the Georgia HOPE scholarship with a 3.0 GPA, he admitted he was not one of the selected students to

receive guidance from his high school counselors. He stated, “They kind of cast me aside,” he said, “for better or worse.” Looking back, Charles pointed to this lack of support as another major factor that led to his decision to forego the Georgia HOPE scholarship and enlist in the military instead of attending college.

The participants who enrolled in a USG institution using the Georgia HOPE scholarship described a mix of positive and negative interactions with the resources available to them in their high schools. Noah, for example, noted that he and his classmates “had a bunch of really good college counselors at [Private School A].” He said that one of the biggest resources the college counselors provided was a set schedule of key points in the college choice process. As he explained,

They would set deadlines for certain milestones or something. Like you have to have this [piece of the application]. Beyond getting your applications in by this deadline, there were other sort of intermediate steps that they would have specific dates [for]. That made it a little bit easier to do everything; apply for student aid and all this other stuff.

Noah recalled knowing that these resources were available to everyone and a certain amount of interaction with the counselors was a mandatory part of his high school experience. In general, Noah described his college counselors as being “pretty aggressive” with their dedication to the students getting in to college. Noah said it was that dedication that pushed him to apply to and attend his college of choice, Institution A.

In contrast, Molly, who attended the same high school as Samantha and Noah (i.e., Private School A), did not have as positive of an experience interacting with the counseling department. As she explained:

The college counselors were a good resource but I also felt like they could be limiting at times because even though we had a few meetings with them, they didn't really know a lot about us, like our likes and dislikes.

Although Molly interacted with her college counselor to complete the mandatory interactions as Noah described, Molly did not feel she received the level of help from her college counselor that Noah and Samantha experienced. As she explained,

They just kind of knew us as students. They would make recommendations [of institutions] and I just didn't feel like I was interested in [the institutions]. They would kind of push [the institutions] on us and that could be kind of difficult to, you know [say], 'I'm really not interested in that. This is what I'm really interested in, having been on this tour and spoken with this person and done this research. I'm not interested in the other thing.'

Similarly, Aaron, who attended Public School C ranked in the top 50 of the best public high schools in Georgia, said he did not recall having a one-on-one consultation with a guidance counselor. As he explained,

[I do not remember] actually sitting down with anyone in high school from the school and them actually going through and saying, 'Hey, what are you interested in? Hey, here's five or six schools that you may or may not be thinking about.'

However, Aaron noted that, although he did not remember having this type of interaction with a guidance counselor in high school, it was possible the resources may have been available and he was simply unaware of them. Aaron was not required to attend mandatory sessions with college counselors like those described by participants who attended Private School A, and class time was not used for the college choice process as it was at Olivia's high school. Aaron was not forced to visit the college counseling department and, therefore, he never did.

**Structural supports and barriers within high school.** In addition to the high school resources they described in the previous section, participants also discussed the broader college-going culture and support within their high schools. Some participants felt that the college-going culture within their high schools served as a positive structural support, while others described a lack of engagement with existing resources. Furthermore, one participant shared that the way he was perceived by his high school peers, as well as the lack of a college-going culture in his high school, served as a barrier in his college choice process.

Most of the participants who had positive interactions with the resources in their high schools noted that these resources were part of a broader high school support system oriented toward applying to college. For example, Samantha noted that her high school, Private School A, boasted that "something like 100 percent of the students go to college, or at least are accepted to college." Samantha remembered that college counselors at Private School A pushed her to succeed in high school and attend college, which served as a positive support in her college choice process. Similarly, Olivia and Alexis

mentioned that their high schools provided class time to complete necessary college choice tasks (e.g., institution applications, financial aid applications) and that, without this support, they would not have known what financial aid options were available to them. Specifically, Alexis noted that, without the class time set aside to complete these tasks, she would not have been able to “look at all [the scholarship] opportunities to really get more money that really is for [students] in the first place.” Alexis continued that “getting the faculty to just talk about scholarships to bring in people who completed [scholarship applications]” was, she felt a “very important” part of the support structure in her high school.

Unlike the positive support structure experienced by participants who enrolled in an out-of-state institution after high school, many of the participants who attended a USG institution did not note a specific support or barrier within their high school and community outside of the few descriptions of positive and negative resource interaction noted in the previous section. For example, Noah’s description of the milestones his college counselor provided was evidence of a positive college-going support structure in his high school, while Molly did not feel sufficiently supported by her college counselor at the same private high school. Similarly, although Aaron noted there may have been college resources available to the students at his Public School C, he did not experience support from these resources and could not recall using the resources at all, as noted above.

Charles, however, shared that he encountered structural barriers to college going within the context of his high school. As he explained, the way that peers and guidance

counselors perceived him may have affected his college choice process: “growing up in a small town in Georgia, everyone knows everyone...things get spread through the grapevine. Things were said about me that weren’t true or [were] very negative... [the counselors] kind of cast me aside for better worse.” Additionally, Charles noted that his high school community, comprised mostly of “the working class type,” did not provide him with knowledge of the college choice process, specifically funding his college education outside of the Georgia HOPE scholarship. He said, “[the community members] don’t have much working knowledge when it comes to college and the process. Long story, long, no, I didn’t [have support].” The barriers Charles encountered, in addition to the issues described in previous sections, influenced his decision to forego the Georgia HOPE scholarship and enlist. Thus, the barriers that Charles described had a negative influence on his college choice process, while the support that out-of-state attendees received positively influenced their college choice processes.

### **The Influence of the Higher Education Context on Student College Choice**

The higher education context includes the materials and information higher education institutions deliver to prospective students, the locations of institutions, and institutional characteristics (e.g., rigor of programs, availability of social groups). Analyses of interview data showed that, although all three components of the higher education context influenced participants’ decisions to enroll in their respective colleges, institutional characteristics were the most frequently cited influence across in- and out-of-state attendees. In addition, marketing messages also played a role in the college choice processes of both in- and out-of-state attendees.

**Location of higher education institution.** Interestingly, particularly given the in-state versus out-of-state focus of my study, I found that, although institutional location was mentioned as a factor in participants' college selection processes, it was not identified by most participants as a particularly influential factor. The most frequent mention of location came from out-of-state participants, a majority of whom mentioned location as a secondary factor to making their decision. For example, Samantha described a process in which she eliminated Georgia schools based on academic rigor first, and second by the availability of the program she wanted to study. Because the two in-state institutions she felt were most rigorous did not have the academic program she wanted to study, she did not apply.

The only out-of-state participant who explained that an out-of-state location was particularly important to her was Olivia. She said that the majority of graduates of her high school stay in-state to attend college. As she explained,

People want to stay in the south unless they're going to an Ivy League [institution]...I was actually the first person from my high school ever to go to [Institution D], just because no one even thinks about it, but that's what I wanted. I wanted a big change.

Further, Olivia said she wanted to leave Georgia for fear of encountering classmates from her high school on her college campus. As she said,

I just was going to get out for my own sanity. I did not want to be at a state school where I could possibly run into [a female classmate] from down the street or a mean girl from high school...I wanted to get out and have my own adventure.

For this reason, Olivia did not apply to any in-state institutions. Other students who enrolled in out-of-state institutions applied to some Georgia institutions but eventually enrolled in out-of-state institutions for reasons other than location, namely institutional characteristics and marketing.

With respect to participants who attended USG institutions, some identified institutional location as an important factor in their college choice process, while others did not. While the majority of in-state participants did not mention location as a factor that influenced their decision to enroll in their selected USG institution, Noah noted that for him, Institution A's location was important. As he said, "proximity to my family...was, frankly, one big factor." However, Aaron mused that he may have been willing to attend an institution farther from his family if his intended major had not been so highly ranked at in-state Institution A. As he explained,

If such a highly ranked program hadn't been available in state, I think that...would have made me think about [foregoing the HOPE scholarship]...two things would have made me think about going out-of-state and one of them would be finding a better program, or two, just trying to go someplace different. Trying to get away.

Thus location, in all cases but Olivia's, was a secondary consideration. However, Aaron's story highlights the importance of institutional characteristics in participants' college choice processes, which I discuss in the following section.

**Institutional characteristics.** In-state and out-of-state study participants often noted the influence of institutional characteristics in their college choice process.

Specifically, participants shared that the availability and rigor of their desired academic program and the “fit” or feel of the college as a whole were extremely important considerations for them when choosing a college. For out-of-state participants, the fit and feel of the campus was the most influential institutional characteristic, while in-state students most often highlighted the rigor of their chosen program as the most influential factor. For example, Emma explained, “[I] went to the school that I, as a person, just naturally fit into...I applied to schools that...I could tell would like a person like me.” Similarly, Samantha used her likes, dislikes, and personality to eliminate or highlight schools she wanted to visit and apply to. She said,

I didn’t want to go to [Institution B] because I didn’t want to go to a big state school that was football crazy, that was very Greek, because I hated football at the time. I’m not a math or science person so I was not interested in [Institution A].

Further, Samantha, whose parents required her to spend the night on campus at each institution she applied to, recalled feeling like Institution E’s campus fit with her personality the most. As she said, “That was my favorite experience, when I stayed at [Institution E]...I just really liked the feel of the campus and the student vibe.”

Although Olivia first composed her list of potential colleges based on academic rigor and the reputation of her intended major at each institution, ultimately it was the feel of the campus that made her decision. As she explained, “What finally made me decide I wanted to go out-of-state is, I went and visited [Institution D], and I fell in love with the campus...It just seemed to fit perfectly.” Similarly, Alexis wanted to be sure that her selected institution was a good fit. As she shared, if she was going to attend a

college that was far away from her home, she wanted to make sure that there were “opportunities to do things outside of academics.” Thus, for Alexis and several other out-of-state participants, their college choice decisions were primarily made based on the fit they felt with their selected institutions. A secondary consideration for these participants was the academic rigor of their intended majors, which they felt helped justify the cost of attending an out-of-state institution.

Conversely, for in-state participants, the academic rigor of their intended major and the academic reputation of institutions played an important role in college choice. For example, Kellie at first considered foregoing the Georgia HOPE scholarship in order to attend an in-state private art school where she would not have been able to use the full scholarship. However, Kellie changed her mind and enrolled in Institution B after learning how competitive it was for in-state students to be accepted there. As she explained,

Later that year, I got my letter that I got into [Institution B] and that was a huge deal...It's so competitive to go to [Institution B] or [Institution A]... The smartest kids in my class, their dream school was [Institution B]...So when I got in with admissions in [Institution B], it was like, ‘Wow, I get to go to [Institution B].’

Further, Kellie noted that she eventually enrolled in [Institution B] primarily because, she said, “it’s a very well-respected academic institution and just the reputation in my mind throughout the year just grew fondly.”

Similarly, Molly, Noah, and Aaron all said that one of the main reasons they enrolled in Institution A was because of the university’s reputation as an academically

rigorous university. They also considered the academic reputations of their respective intended majors at Institution A. During her college choice process, Molly said she was interested in a scientific field and Institution A's program was one of the best in the nation. Molly shared: "Aside from the cost [a deciding factor] was just the fact that [Institution A] is such a recognizable name with such highly ranked programs." Likewise, Noah recalled, "[Institution A] was, is, a very good school... It's a top school for [my major] on all of the lists... it's just a really good school.

Finally, Aaron reported similar feelings regarding the academic rigor of Institution A. As he explained:

If [Institution A] hadn't been so highly ranked in the program I wanted to do I probably would have spent more time looking [at other institutions] because it is such a good program. I think, at the time, it was number two for [my major field of study].

Because Institution A had such a highly ranked program in his planned area of study, and because the Georgia HOPE scholarship would fund his attendance at Institution A, Aaron did not apply to any other institutions. Thus, while all of the in-state participants reported a secondary influence of other institutional characteristics (e.g., student life, campus feel, location) their college choices, ultimately, were more influenced by the academic reputations of institutions and areas of study.

**Marketing messages.** The ways in which marketing messages influenced students' college choice processes often highlighted the institutional characteristics the participants noted in the previous section. All participants who attended an out-of-state

institution said they were directly influenced by the marketing messages of the institution they eventually attended. Alexis, for example, was influenced by institutional marketing and recruited early by Institution C. Institution C sent information to Alexis in her sophomore year of high school, recruiting her to come to campus for a week-long leadership conference in the summer. After the summer experience, Alexis began receiving more marketing messages from [Institution C]. Outside of the increased amount of marketing materials, Alexis said the summer experience helped her. As she explained, “having those summer experiences away from home really helped me get on [Institution C’s] radar but also it just made the decision easier because it [made me feel like Institution C] just wanted me that much.” Having received marketing materials and been recruited by Institution C, Alexis felt as though the institution wanted her and, thus, she believed the institution would be a good fit for her. Similarly, Alexis described the lack of marketing efforts from other colleges as a key factor that kept her from enrolling at those institutions. As she explained, “Certain institutions, I reached out to them and they weren’t sending me that much mail. They weren’t emailing me that much...I really wanted schools to want me just as much as I wanted them.” The amount of information Alexis received from institutions therefore directly influenced her feelings about her college options and ultimately aided in her decision to enroll at Institution C.

Marketing materials also influenced Emma’s eventual decision to enroll at Institution D, although not to the extent that they influenced Alexis. Emma gained some of the information about the institutions she applied to online, on her own, but she also received a packet of information in the mail from Institution D. Additionally, Emma said

she “got a lot of emails” from other schools and Institution D. Ultimately, this source of information proved helpful because Emma was the only student from her high school to apply to Institution D and, thus, she knew little about Institution D outside of the materials the institution sent her and information available on Institution D’s website.

Like Emma, Olivia was also positively influenced by Institution D’s marketing. She recalled a specific YouTube video created by the Office of Admissions at Institution D that took a humorous, musical approach to highlighting several aspects of life at Institution D (e.g., academics, student life, athletics). Despite the lighthearted nature of the video, Olivia said she found it persuasive. As she explained, “I was like ‘Sold! I’m done [looking at other colleges].’”

The experiences of Alexis, Emma, and Olivia highlight the influence of marketing on student college choice. While these students may have initially learned about institutions through resources they encountered in high school, the institutional marketing allowed them to learn new information about what it might be like to attend institutions. As Alexis noted, such institutional marketing helped her expand her list of prospective schools beyond those suggested by her high school guidance counselor. As she explained, “when all your counselors...stayed in-state, they’re going to push that in-state [institution] on you.”

None of the study participants who enrolled in USG institutions recalled receiving influential marketing materials. Rather, they were drawn to apply to institutions for other reasons, which I will discuss later in this chapter. For example, when asked directly about the availability and frequency of marketing materials from various institutions, Aaron

said, “I can’t remember getting any letters in the mail from any schools saying ‘Hey, come take a look at us!’” Similarly, Noah recalled that the lack of marketing efforts from other institutions had a large impact on his eventual decision. He said, “I think [the lack of marketing] did make a difference, because some schools didn’t do anything and were not responsive even to me actively trying to ask questions.” The other participants who eventually enrolled in a USG institution could not recall receiving marketing outreach from any institutions; rather, they learned about the institutions they applied to through their own research and their college counselors.

### **The Influence of Policy Changes on Student College Choice**

Although the fourth layer of Perna’s (2006) model of student college choice includes the economic climate students experience during their college choice process, the participants in this study shared that they were not aware of the larger economic climate when they were choosing colleges. Rather, as discussed earlier in this chapter, participants spoke specifically about the family and high school resources that were available to them.

However, participants had an awareness of the role the Georgia HOPE scholarship played, or did not play, in their college choice process. Thus, my findings align with the public policy component of layer four in Perna’s (2006) model, but not the economic component of the same layer. The remainder of the findings discussed in this chapter relate to the characteristics of public policy decisions and how public policy influenced participants’ college choice processes.

**Public policy: Georgia HOPE scholarship program.** Out-of-state participants did not often report a concern about the financial aspect of their college decision. As noted earlier, a majority of out-of-state participants knew early in their college choice process that their parents would be able to finance their degree and, because of this knowledge, they did not limit their college search process to in-state schools. Indeed, as was the case with Olivia, some participants did not apply to any Georgia schools in spite of receiving the HOPE scholarship. Olivia said that for her, cost was not a limiting factor in her college choice process and she did not consider using the HOPE scholarship. As she explained, “I knew [my parents] were going to pay for [Institution D]...as long as I wasn’t being outrageous.” Olivia applied for and received other scholarships, which she said justified the cost of choosing an out-of-state institution and foregoing the Georgia HOPE scholarship. Even without additional scholarship dollars, Olivia said she still would not have used the HOPE scholarship to attend an in-state institution. As she said, “I probably would have gone where I wanted to go and taken the debt if I had to take out loans.”

Similarly, Emma referred to the Georgia HOPE scholarship as “a safety net” rather than an option she considered in her college choice process. Emma, unlike Olivia, knew early on in her college choice process that her parents would not be able to pay for her higher education. She said that she knew the HOPE scholarship would enable her to cover the costs of attending a Georgia institution. As she explained, “I didn’t really know how I was going to pay for it, but in the back of my mind I knew if I needed to go to a Georgia school, I could.” However, Emma regarded the Georgia HOPE scholarship as a

back-up plan, and echoed the sentiments of other out-of-state participants who believed that the institutional characteristics of their out-of-state choices outweighed the costs they might have incurred by foregoing the HOPE scholarship. She continued, “I would have rather paid a little bit more to go to an out-of-state school.” Ultimately, Emma received scholarships from [Institution D] that covered the full cost of her tuition. Because of the change in Georgia HOPE scholarship policy, which cut the full coverage of tuition as Emma was completing her college choice process, Emma said, “[I] felt confident that the [out-of-state] schools that I was applying to would give me comparable [scholarships] based on my academics.”

For Alexis, changes to the HOPE Scholarship Program factored into her decision to attend an out-of-state institution. She applied to college after the HOPE Scholarship reduced the amount of covered tuition, and she shared that she became discouraged during her college choice process when she compared the amount of scholarship money she was eligible for at out-of-state institutions and the amount of scholarship money she would receive if she were to use the Georgia HOPE scholarship. As she explained,

A lot of it came down to, HOPE wouldn't cover many of the other expenses...[I was] really looking at the broad spectrum of ‘Am I really getting more than I'm giving?’ I wanted to graduate with not much student loan debt.

Like Emma, Alexis was confident that she could qualify for scholarships at out-of-state institutions that would be competitive with the amount of money she was eligible for through the Georgia HOPE scholarship. Alexis's belief proved to be correct; when she applied to out-of-state institutions, she found that the out-of-state institutions offered her

scholarships that covered a higher percent of her tuition when compared to the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program.

Among participants who attended out-of-state institutions, Emma, Olivia, and Alexis were most affected by the changes to the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program. Overall, all three participants said they were aware that there was a possibility that out-of-state institutions could provide them with additional scholarship options beyond those afforded by the HOPE scholarship. Further, they shared that the positive institutional characteristics of out-of-state institutions outweighed the appeal of the HOPE scholarship and the characteristics of in-state institutions.

However, all of the participants who attended in-state institutions graduated from high school before the major changes to the funding structure of the Georgia HOPE scholarship took effect. Perhaps for this reason, in-state participants spoke positively of the Georgia HOPE scholarship and their decisions to use the scholarship to attend in-state institutions. For example, Kellie recalled an excited conversation with her parents about the Georgia HOPE scholarship and the prospect of using it to enroll at Institution B. She shared:

The HOPE scholarship is a huge deal and my parents were really excited about the fact that I would be going to school for free...HOPE was such a big deal to my parents and that was definitely something that was in my mind.

Additionally, Molly commented that the HOPE scholarship was important to her parents and their financial situation. As she explained, "I knew my parents wanted me to go to [Institution A] for a lot of reasons...it would be a lot cheaper." Further, Molly said, out-

of-state institutions were not able to compete with the full funding she received from the HOPE scholarship. As she explained,

[Out-of-state institutions] offered me their own scholarships and it just wasn't going to be comparable to HOPE...I just didn't feel good about not using HOPE at that point for the education I could get at [Institution A]. Like such a recognizable name compared to this smaller private school. That was my consideration of HOPE; pretty much was just that it was going to be so helpful that it would be really just silly not to use it.

Other in-state participants echoed Molly's sentiments regarding the Georgia HOPE scholarship. Indeed, all participants who used the HOPE scholarship to attend USG institutions when the program fully funded tuition said the scholarship made it difficult to consider out-of-state institutions.

However, when asked, hypothetically, if they would have made the same decision if the HOPE scholarship had covered less than the full cost of tuition, in-state participants had a wide range of responses. Aaron, for example, said, "it would have made me think more about my college choice," knowing that there would be a lower return on his investment in college if he did not use the Georgia HOPE scholarship. Further, Aaron, who only applied to in-state Institution A where he eventually enrolled, believed that a decrease in the HOPE scholarship would have forced him to "look at other things" during his college choice process. Noah took Aaron's sentiments one step further, noting that, without the Georgia HOPE scholarship to cover his tuition at Institution A, he most likely would have considered his second choice college. As he explained, "HOPE was a huge

factor...If money were no object...I probably would have gone to [out-of-state, southern institution].” However, both Aaron and Noah noted that the dramatic difference between in-state tuition and the tuition at out-of-state institutions still would have made Institution A a top option for them.

### **Summary of Findings**

As discussed in this chapter, study participants all described influences on their college choice processes that corresponded to the four layers of Perna’s (2006) model, regardless of whether they used the HOPE scholarship to attend an in-state institution or not. With respect to layer one of Perna’s model, participants who enrolled at in-state institutions and used the HOPE scholarship shared that they had fewer resources available to them throughout the college choice process relative to participants who attended out-of-state institutions. Out-of-state participants said that the knowledge that their parents could afford the tuition at an out-of-state institution without the assistance of the Georgia HOPE scholarship was a factor that enabled them to apply to and attend out-of-state institutions. In terms of layer two of Perna’s model, although several participants had comparable resources available to them in high school, out-of-state participants perceived more support from their high schools throughout their college choice processes than did in-state participants.

Participants’ college choice processes were affected by components of layer three of the model in two different ways. Participants who did not use the HOPE scholarship characterized institutional marketing efforts and institutional characteristics as important factors in their college choice processes. The majority of in-state participants who used

the HOPE scholarship, however, shared that they did not receive any marketing materials from higher education institutions and instead based their college choice decisions on the academic reputations of institutions and areas of study.

Finally, with respect to the fourth layer of Perna's model, which includes the economic and public policy climate, I found that the public policy climate influenced both in-state and out-of-state participants. Out-of-state participants, all of whom applied to college after policy changes to the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program began, shared that they were able to secure competitive scholarship offers from out-of-state institutions. These competitive offers directly influenced the participants' decisions to forego the decreased HOPE scholarship. In-state participants, all of whom applied to college before the policy changes to the HOPE program, shared that the full-tuition scholarship they received from the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program was a key factor in their decision to enroll at in-state institutions.

Ultimately, all participants recalled that their college choice processes involved components of all four of Perna's (2006) layers. Most participants could not point to a single set of factors that influenced their decision to attend their college of choice. Rather, each participant identified aspects of each layer in the model that were important to their college choice process.

In the following chapter, I discuss these findings further in relation to existing research, and make recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this research was to explore the factors that influenced Georgia HOPE scholarship recipients' college choice processes. Using an interpretive, constructivist framework, I analyzed interview data to gain insight into each participant's unique reality that shaped their college choice process after receiving the Georgia HOPE scholarship. The research questions which informed this study were:

- 1) In what ways, if any, have contextual factors shaped the college choice process for Georgia high school graduates who have received a Georgia HOPE scholarship?
- 2) How, if at all, have changes to Georgia HOPE scholarship award amounts affected Georgia HOPE scholarship recipients' decisions to attend or not attend a USG institution?

This research was informed by Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student change (Figure 1) with respect to the four layers of student college choice: (1) the student's habitus, social knowledge and value of a college degree; (2) the school and community of which the individual is a part; (3) the higher education institution's context and qualities; and (4) the social, economic, and policy context in the broader public sphere.

This chapter includes a discussion of my findings as they pertain to Perna's (2006) model and connects my findings to previous research on the Georgia HOPE scholarship and the student college-choice process. I conclude the chapter with a

discussion of implications for policy and practice, as well as suggestions for future research.

## **Discussion**

My findings showed that participants who enrolled at out-of-state institutions were influenced similarly by layers one (habitus) and three (higher education context), while participants who attended in-state institutions were influenced primarily by layer two (high school context). These findings directly reflected previous research, which highlights the importance of parental influence, high school resources, and higher education institutional characteristics during the college-choice process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Domina, 2013; Heller, 1999; Hossler & Vesper, 1993; McDonough, 1997; Monks, 2009; Perna, 2006; Stage & Hossler, 1989; Titus & Perna, 2004). Further, previous research describes the role of these factors in the college-choice process. Such research highlights that, as these factors increase in influence, a student's likelihood to enroll in a higher education institution will increase (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Vesper, 1993; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006; Stage & Hossler, 1989; Titus & Perna, 2004).

In addition, research shows that increases in financial aid awards influence students to enroll in higher education institutions when compared to lower financial aid awards or no financial aid awards at all (Domina, 2013; Heller, 1999; Monks, 2009). The Georgia HOPE Scholarship program followed this trend as the introduction of the program increased the enrollment of Georgia high school graduates at USG institutions when the HOPE Scholarship Program covered all of a recipient's tuition at the USG

institution of their choice (Cornwell et al., 2006; Dynarski, 2000; Wright, 2001).

However, previous research failed to address whether the changes to the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program that reduced the amount of tuition the program covered had an effect on these enrollment trends. Although an aim of my study was to examine the effect of declining HOPE awards on participants' college choice processes, my findings showed that the fourth layer (social, economic, and policy context), which includes the HOPE program, only influenced participants as a secondary factor. While participants, specifically those who enrolled in in-state institutions, were influenced by the Georgia HOPE scholarship as a guiding factor in their college-choice processes, many highlighted that the large difference between in-state and out-of-state tuition may have still deterred them from enrolling in an out-of-state institution, even if the HOPE scholarship did not exist.

**Factors that led to out-of-state student college-choice.** Participants who enrolled in out-of-state institutions were most influenced by the first layer (habitus) and third layer (higher education context) of Perna's (2006) model. With respect to the first layer, participants who enrolled in out-of-state institutions were informed early in their college choice processes that their parents would pay for their undergraduate degree, regardless of whether they chose to use the Georgia HOPE scholarship or not. Because of this, the majority of out-of-state participants did not apply to any in-state institutions and were able to focus on the institutional characteristics that were most important to them. These findings align with Cabrera and La Nasa's (2000) research, which found that a student's perception of their parent's ability to pay for their higher education directly

influences a student's college-choice process. These findings are also supported by the work of Tierney (2002), which showed that the involvement of a family in the college-choice process and the availability of family financial resources were the most influential factors in the college choice process.

In addition, unlike their in-state counterparts, out-of-state participants were influenced heavily by the marketing efforts and institutional characteristics of higher education institutions. Out-of-state students primarily used marketing messages to determine institutional fit. Several out-of-state participants reported a need to feel as if they would have similarities with the student population currently attending an institution and the characteristics of an institution (e.g., sporting activities, Greek organizations). This finding runs counter to that of Maringe (2006), whose research showed that institutional advertisements and promotion activities "do not have a great influence on the choices students make about where to study" (p. 474). Indeed, Maringe (2006) found that program availability and institutional reputation were the factors that students considered to be most important in their college-choice processes. However, while out-of-state students in my study mentioned the rigor of their academic programs of interest as a factor of their college choice process, this consideration was outweighed by considerations related to institutional fit.

Although my findings contradict those of Maringe (2006), they align with prior research that points to a connection between students' socioeconomic status and their level of interaction with higher education institutions (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). This work shows that as a student's socioeconomic status increases, the more likely they are to

receive information from higher education institutions. Conversely, as a student's socioeconomic status decreases, a student primarily receives information from their high school's college counselor (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000).

**Factors that led to in-state student college choice.** In terms of factors that led participants to choose Georgia institutions over out-of-state institutions, participants who chose to stay in state were most often influenced by layer two (high school resources). While in-state and out-of-state participants reported similar levels of resources within their high schools, in-state participants did not feel as supported by these resources.

Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) noted a need to have created a potential college list by the end of tenth grade in order to continue the college-choice process through marketing materials, college visits, and college counselor meetings. In-state participants in this study did not report having created a robust college list and they did not mention college visits as an influence in their college-choice process to the extent that their out-of-state peers did. As the literature reports (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; McDonough, 1997), this lack of college guidance directly influences a student's likelihood of attending college. In my study, the lack of college guidance that in-state students received did not deter most of them from attending college, but it did play a role in reducing the likelihood that they would enroll in an out-of-state institution.

Indeed, several in-state participants did not remember receiving guidance from their college counseling departments. These findings echo the findings of McDonough (1997) and Titus and Perna (2004), which showed the importance of high school support in the college choice process. McDonough's (1997) work revealed that even if students

visited with a college counselor they were inclined to report that the counselor did not know them or their family well enough to assist in the college process. One participant in my study explicitly expressed this sentiment, sharing that she felt underprepared for her college-choice process due to the fact that her college counselor lacked personal knowledge about her. Further, even students who frequently visited their counselors or were required to visit a counselor by their high school did not report a direct influence from their counselor on their college-choice process.

Titus and Perna (2004) also described the influence of high school resources, in particular the support that students receive from their college counselors and their parents. Specifically, Titus and Perna (2004) noted that without outside support, students perceive limited options for college enrollment. Further, their research showed that increased high school resources increased the involvement of parents, thus increasing the positive influence on a student's college-choice process. This research aligns with my findings, as in-state participants did not find the guidance they received in high school sufficient or helpful, and there was no relationship between their college counselors and their parents to reinforce the support they received at high school.

**Influence of the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program.** With respect to ways in which the Georgia HOPE program influenced college choice, differences between in-state and out-of-state participants were difficult to discern due to the fact that all in-state participants graduated from high school before HOPE policy changes took effect. In spite of this, my findings suggest ways in which the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program influenced student choice. First, in-state participants were influenced by the financial

aspects of the Georgia HOPE scholarship. In particular, they believed that out-of-state institutions could not offer scholarship support that was competitive with the HOPE scholarship. Of the in-state participants who applied to in-state and out-of-state institutions, none of the participants reported receiving a scholarship to another university that matched, or even competed with, the Georgia HOPE scholarship financially. This made USG institutions a clear choice for the in-state students. However, out-of-state students, who, overall, graduated as changes to the HOPE scholarship were being implemented or after the changes took place, received financially comparable scholarships from the out-of-state institutions they applied to and enrolled in. Out-of-state participants used the additional and comparable scholarships they received to justify their decisions to forego the Georgia HOPE scholarship and enroll in out-of-state institutions.

These findings directly support previous research showing that increased financial aid will increase student enrollment while decreased financial aid will decrease student enrollment (Domina, 2013; Heller, 1999; Monks, 2009). However, research also showed that the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program increased the enrollment of Georgia high school graduates prior to the fiscal changes to the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program (Cornwell et al., 2006; Dynarski, 2000; Wright, 2001). My study revealed that students who received increased or comparable aid at out-of-state institutions chose to enroll at those institutions rather than relying on the Georgia HOPE scholarship.

### **Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research**

In this study, I found that several factors presented in previous literature, such as higher education institution characteristics, parental support, and high school support, influenced students during the college-choice process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Vesper, 1993; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006; Stage & Hossler, 1989; Titus & Perna; 2004). Further, I found that students who received a full-tuition and fees, state-sponsored scholarship were influenced more by the scholarship than students who received the same scholarship with a decreased amount of tuition covered in the scholarship, which aligns with previous literature highlighting the benefits of financial aid and state-sponsored scholarship programs (Domina, 2013; Heller, 1999; Monks, 2009). The following sections outline the implications these findings have for policy and practice. I conclude with suggestions for future research.

**Implications for policy.** As of 2012, eight states consistently used lottery-funded merit scholarship programs, and the programs have a wide array of criteria and benefits. The goals of such programs are simple: to “attract and retain the best and the brightest students in the state” and to “widen [the] opportunity for higher education by reducing students’ financial burdens” (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2012, p. 5). However, as seen in my findings, a decline in the funding provided by state-sponsored scholarships has the potential to decrease the number of qualified students that stay in-state. Policy makers should consider the threshold of available aid when changing scholarship award amounts. Additionally, as suggested by the findings of this study and previous research, strengthening support for the college choice process at the high school level might better prepare students for the college-choice process.

***Maintaining scholarship thresholds.*** Although previous research highlighted the enrollment benefits of the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program (Cornwell et al., 2006; Dynarski, 2000; Wright, 2001), this study, which includes students' experiences after scholarship award changes, supports findings reported in prior financial aid and scholarship literature. Financial aid and scholarship literature demonstrates that during their college-choice processes, students are generally award-responsive; as financial aid award amounts in all forms decline, the awards' effects on enrollment also decline (Avery, 2004; Domina, 2013; Heller, 1999; Monks, 2009; van der Klaauw, 2002). The administrators of state-funded scholarship programs like the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program must therefore consider the effect that decreasing scholarship award amounts might have on enrollment. Further, administrators should consider the overarching effects of declining enrollment on institutions, particularly given statewide budgetary constraints.

By maintaining state-sponsored scholarship dollar amounts, policy makers would enhance the role of the scholarship in students' college-choice processes, as illustrated by the experiences of in-state participants in my study. A change in scholarship policies while students are completing their student college-choice process can eliminate the scholarship from a student's consideration, thus eliminating a potential student from the pool of prospective high-achieving, in-state students.

***High school resources.*** This study and previous research pointed to the importance of high school resources in students' college-choice processes. Although the positive influence of college counseling programs on the college-choice process has been

widely documented (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; McDonough, 1997; Titus & Perna, 2004), policy makers have not increased the number of college counselors within public school districts, thus limiting counselors' availability to students during their college-choice processes (Murphy, 2016). Further, only three states meet the students-to-counselor ratio of 250 to 1 recommended by the National Association for College Admission Counseling; Georgia is not one of the three states (Murphy, 2016). Nationally, the average students-to-counselor ratio is 491:1, almost double the recommended ratio (Murphy, 2016). As the number of students per counselor increases, the availability and influence of the college counselor as a resource in a student's college-choice process decreases. Policy makers should therefore consider an increase in funding for high school counseling programs, as such an increase has the potential to increase students' likelihood of enrolling in college.

**Implications for Practice.** This study captured students' perceptions of current practices within both higher education and high school, revealing how practices can leave students alone in the college-choice process. Specifically, this study pointed toward actionable items that higher education institutions and high schools can apply to increase college-going among high school graduates. In particular, my findings suggest that higher education institutions should tailor their marketing messages, and high schools should work to increase the quality of students' interactions with college counselors.

**Marketing messages.** This study demonstrated the importance of institutional factors on students' college choice processes, specifically the influence of marketing messages and the information delivered within those marketing messages. While

students who stayed in state benefited from the Georgia HOPE scholarship, a major factor that contributed to their college choice process was the reputation of in-state institutions and academic programs of interest at those institutions. This finding suggests that, in states that rely on state-funded scholarships to increase enrollment, institutions should consider the rigor of their academic programs as a factor of utmost importance in recruiting students and promote the academic rigor and reputation of their programs in marketing outreach. Further, marketing messages greatly influenced out-of-state participants, who used institutional marketing messages to determine if the institutions they were considering would match their interests through the availability of clubs and activities or the rigor and reputation of academic programs. Higher education institutions that do not already do so should thus consider including current student profiles, career outcomes data, and student life information in marketing messages to attract students and increase enrollment.

*Usage of high school resources.* This study and previous college-choice research shows that students who feel supported in their college-choice process while in high school are more likely to enroll in a higher education institution and more likely to apply to more colleges than participants who did not feel similarly supported. As mentioned above, there is a shortage of high school counselors across the U.S., which decreases opportunities for students to develop meaningful and supportive relationships with their college counselors. College counselors must therefore do more with less. Given that even participants in this study who interacted with their college counselors in high school did not always feel the counselors were a positive influence on their college-choice

processes, college counselors should develop strategies for transforming casual, impersonal interactions into meaningful and influential interactions.

High schools that seek to increase the number of their students who enroll in college or increase the number of colleges that students apply to might, for example, consider increasing the time counselors are allowed to dedicate to the student college-choice process. Changes like this could supplement a lack of marketing from institutions, as they would enable college counselors to provide students with more detailed information about how colleges match students' individual interests. Counselors should be prompted to offer a wide range of options to students not just the path they took as undergraduate students.

These suggestions for practice included recommendations for multiple sectors (e.g., state governments, school boards) and highlighted gaps in practice at both the higher education and high school levels. The following recommendations for further research provide opportunities to expand these recommendations through studies that may lead to more in-depth findings on student college choice and state-funded scholarship programs.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

In this study, I examined the factors that influenced participants' college choice decisions and whether changes to Georgia HOPE scholarship award amounts affected participants' decisions to attend in-state USG institutions or out-of-state institutions. Based on the findings and the limitations of my study, suggestions for future research include: an expansion of the current study to include multiple populations that were not

sampled for my study; an examination of the enrollment effects of the Georgia HOPE scholarship policy changes on USG institutions, varied by selectivity and Carnegie Classification; and a longitudinal study to examine the long-term influence of the use or non-use of the Georgia HOPE scholarship on student employment and educational outcomes.

*Expansion of the current study.* Although this study expands what is known about student college choice in states with state-funded lottery programs, future studies on the Georgia HOPE scholarship should include a larger number of participants who completed their college-choice processes before and after changes to the program. Further, an expansion of this study should include participants who attended in-state and out-of-state institutions and participants who delayed college enrollment or did not attend college. A study with these parameters would show the influence of the changes to the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program award amounts on college choice by comparing six populations: HOPE recipients who received the scholarship before award changes and enrolled in-state; HOPE recipients who received the scholarship after award changes and enrolled in-state; HOPE recipients who received the scholarship before award changes and enrolled out-of-state; HOPE recipients who received the scholarship after award changes and enrolled out-of-state; HOPE recipients who received the scholarship before award changes and delayed enrollment or did not enroll; and HOPE recipients who received the scholarship after award changes and delayed enrollment or did not enroll. Further, future researchers might consider interviewing in-state, out-of-state, and non-enrolled participants in a state that does not offer a state-sponsored scholarship program,

in order to use that data for comparison purposes. Such research would build upon previous research that documented and examined the enrollment effects of the Georgia HOPE scholarship (Domina, 2013; Heller, 1999; Monks, 2009) prior to HOPE policy changes.

*Examination of USG institutional tiers.* An additional gap within this study, and in previous studies that examined the Georgia HOPE scholarship, is inclusion of participants who enrolled in USG institutions that were varied by Carnegie Classification or institutional selectivity. Although previous research examined enrollment trends by race (Dynarski, 2000; Wright, 2001) and socioeconomic background (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Dynarski, 2000; Heller, 2006), little attention has been paid to the enrollment trends of scholarship recipients in relation to institutional factors. While this study's in-state population primarily attended highly selective, high research activity institutions, including participants who attended in-state institutions of varied selectivity and Carnegie Classification would allow researchers to more closely examine the influence of higher education characteristics on the student college-choice process. Further, such research might show the effects of the Georgia HOPE scholarship on enrollment at each level of USG institution by Carnegie Classification and selectivity, both before and after HOPE policy changes.

*Longitudinal study.* While previous research on the Georgia HOPE scholarship compared the high school and undergraduate performance of HOPE scholarship recipients (Cornwell et al., 2005; Dee & Jackson, 1999; Henry et al., 2004; Henry & Rubenstein, 2002), researchers have not yet explored HOPE recipient outcomes after

college. A longitudinal study comparing the post-college outcomes (e.g., income upon employment, graduate school attendance) for HOPE scholarship recipients who attended a USG institution and maintained their HOPE scholarship status with HOPE scholarship recipients who attended a USG institution and lost their scholarship would contribute to the literature on state-sponsored scholarships by showing any long-term effects of the HOPE scholarship. Given that the original goals of the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program were to keep middle-class, high achieving students in state for college and work beyond college (Jecarter4, 2012), a longitudinal study would help policy makers determine if the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program was achieving these goals.

## **Conclusion**

Findings from this study suggest that, in keeping with Perna's (2006) model, students are influenced by several factors during the college-choice process, including family finances, high school resources, and institutional characteristics. I found that for many study participants from families with higher incomes, the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program was less influential in the college choice process than these other factors. In particular, if students perceived that their parents had saved for college, their college choice processes were more heavily influenced by factors such as institutional characteristics. Scholarship programs, like the Georgia HOPE scholarship, remain critical for students who perform at a high academic level but continue to have high financial need.

The findings of this study illustrate the importance of non-financial factors (e.g., higher education characteristics, high school resources) in the student college-choice process when financial constraints are eliminated either through a state-sponsored scholarship program or through parents' savings. Based on these findings, suggestions for policy include the maintenance of state-sponsored scholarship programs to increase student enrollment and fulfill program goals, and increased attention to – and funding for -- high school resources dedicated to college-going. Further, suggestions for practice include a need for specific marketing messages from higher education institutions that highlight key institutional characteristics. Finally, suggestions for future research include an expansion of the current study to include multiple populations that were not sampled for my study, an examination of the enrollment effects of Georgia HOPE scholarship policy changes, and a longitudinal study to examine the long-term effects of the Georgia HOPE scholarship on student employment and educational outcomes.

It is my hope that this study contributes to efforts to expand the number of students who apply to and attend college. In 2016, the national high school graduation rate was higher than it had ever been (82 percent), while the college-going rate was comparatively low at 66 percent (Wong, 2016). In fact, the national college-going rate declined four years in a row from 69 percent in 2008 to 66 percent in 2013 (Wong, 2016). Although this trend has largely been correlated to improvements in the economy after the 2008 Recession that allowed students to secure entry-level positions with a high school degree, an alarming number of the poorest high school graduates (students from the bottom 20 percent of family income) report declining enrollment trends when compared

to their peers (Brown, 2015). These statistics show the need to track, analyze, and improve practices in the high school and higher education sectors to improve college-going rates, specifically for low-income students. It is my hope that, by showing where students need assistance in the college choice process beyond offering a state-sponsored scholarship, my study will contribute to the goal of making college more accessible for all students.

## APPENDIX A

Table 1

*Participant High School and College Characteristics and Graduation Years*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>High School Attended</b>	<b>High School Graduation Year</b>	<b>College Attended</b>	<b>College Graduation Year</b>
<b>Emma</b>	Public School A	2012	Institution D	2016
<b>Olivia</b>	Private School B	2010	Institution D	2014
<b>Alexis</b>	Public School D	2013	Institution C	2017 <sup>a</sup>
<b>Samantha</b>	Private School A	2007	Institution E	2011
<b>Charles</b>	Public School E	2005	Institution E <sup>b</sup>	2016 <sup>b</sup>
<b>Aaron</b>	Pubic School C	2005	Institution A	2009
<b>Molly</b>	Private School A	2007	Institution A	2011
<b>Kellie</b>	Public School B	2008	Institution B	2012
<b>Noah</b>	Private School A	2008	Institution A	2012

<sup>a</sup>Expected graduation year

<sup>b</sup>Delayed higher education enrollment due to military service

## APPENDIX B

Table 2

*Private School Rankings*

	<b>Private High School Rank (of 132 private schools)</b>	<b>Rank of Student College Readiness (of 132 private schools)</b>
<b>Private School A</b>	Top 10	Top 10
<b>Private School B</b>	Top 5	Top 10

## APPENDIX C

Table 3

*Public School Rankings*

	<b>Public High School Rank (of 426 public schools)</b>	<b>Rank of Student College Readiness (of 426 public schools)</b>
<b>Public School A</b>	Top 140	Top 100
<b>Public School B</b>	Top 20	Top 30
<b>Public School C</b>	Top 50	Top 30
<b>Public School D</b>	Top 100	Top 100
<b>Public School E</b>	Top 130	Top 150

## APPENDIX D

Table 4

*Institution Characteristics*

	<b>USG Institution</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Public or Private</b>
<b>Institution A</b>	X	Georgia	Large	Public
<b>Institution B</b>	X	Georgia	Large	Public
<b>Institution C</b>		Mid-Atlantic	Large	Public
<b>Institution D</b>		Mid-Atlantic	Medium	Public
<b>Institution E</b>		Mid-Atlantic	Small	Public

## **APPENDIX E**

### **Recruitment Email**

Good afternoon/morning/evening,

My name is Tierney Keller, and I am a master's student at George Mason in the Higher Education program. I am conducting a research study on the Georgia HOPE scholarship and the factors that influence college choice.

Participants in this study must: have once received a Georgia HOPE scholarship, have attended/ currently attending an institution of higher education (any), and be willing to sit down for a one-hour interview regarding your experiences. If this applies to you, please respond to [tkeller7@gmu.edu](mailto:tkeller7@gmu.edu) if you would be willing to participate in this research study.

Please see below for more information regarding the study, your expectations, and scheduling information.

#### **Background of this Study**

Through this study, I am hoping to gain a better understanding of your pathway into college and how the Georgia HOPE scholarship influenced your decision to attend your higher education institution. As a student who received the Georgia HOPE scholarship, your perspectives are invaluable.

#### **Scheduling**

The interview will take place during the Spring 2017 semester. The interview will take place on the George Mason University Arlington or Fairfax campus in a private meeting room or via Skype and will be scheduled at your convenience.

#### **IRB Information**

This project is IRBNet number xxxxxx-x, and Dr. Amy Swan is the principal investigator.

Your participation in this study would be greatly appreciated. Please let me know if you have any questions about the study and also if you would be available to participate.

Thank you!

## APPENDIX F

### Informed Consent Form for Interviews

#### *The Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program and the Factors Influencing Student College Choice*

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

#### **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

This research is being conducted to explore the influence of the Georgia HOPE scholarship on student college choice. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in a one hour interview, discussing your pathway to college, as well as your experiences with the Georgia HOPE scholarship. Please note that the interview will be audio recorded. Additionally, you will be asked to advertise the study via Facebook using language provided to you by the researcher, attached to this form.

#### **RISKS**

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

#### **BENEFITS**

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research in factors influencing student college choice.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The data, which includes a transcribed version of the digital audio file, will only include your name on an Excel spreadsheet that corresponds to the number of the transcribed interview document. The principal investigator, Dr. Amy Swan, Ms. Keller and a third party transcription service, *Datalyst*, are the only people who will have access to this data. This information will be kept on a non-public computer for the required 5 years. Copies of the audio recording will be stored on a computer until it can be transcribed. It will then remain on this computer for 5 calendar years; after this point it will be deleted from the computer and hard drive in its entirety. You may review Skype's website for information about their privacy statement.

<https://www.microsoft.com/privacystatement/en-us/skype/default.aspx>. While it is understood that no computer transmission can be perfectly secure, reasonable efforts will be made to protect the confidentiality of your transmission. Participants will be identified by pseudonyms in the final report.

#### **PARTICIPATION**

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. All digital audio files and transcripts will be destroyed upon your withdrawal from the study. There are no costs to you or any other party. You must be 18 years or older to participate.

**CONTACT**

This research is being conducted by Ms. Tierney Keller, a master’s student in the Higher Education program at George Mason University and by Dr. Amy Swan, faculty member in the Higher Education program at George Mason University and the Principle Investigator of this study. Ms. Keller may be reached at 609-367-2559 and Dr. Swan may be reached at 703-993-5243 for questions or to report a research-related problem. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Integrity & Assurance at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

**CONSENT**

I have read this form, all of my questions have been answered by the research staff, and I agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature Date of Signature

**FACEBOOK ADVERTISEMENT**

**“GEORGIA HOPE SCHOLARSHIP RESEARCH STUDY**

You are invited to participate in a study examining your decision to attend your college or university after receiving a Georgia HOPE scholarship by Tierney Keller at the George Mason University, Department of Higher Education. The study involves a one-hour interview either in-person or via Skype. If you are 18 years or older, are attending or have attended college, received a Georgia HOPE scholarship, and would like more information about participating, contact: Tierney Keller at 609-367-2559 or tkeller7@gmu.edu”

## APPENDIX G

### Research Protocol – USG Attendee

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today! Through this study, I am hoping to gain a better understanding of what factors contributed to where you chose to go to college. As a student who attended (name of institution they attended) and received a Georgia HOPE scholarship after high school, your perspectives are extremely helpful for this research. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary, and you may choose to not answer any of the question or questions I may ask you today. There are no right or wrong answers. [Review consent form with participant. Obtain signatures on two copies of consent form; Give one copy to interviewee for his/her records.] Do you have any (other) questions before we begin?

#### Introductory Questions:

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.

#### Possible Follow Up:

- a. Where did you grow up?
- b. What did your parents (or guardians) do?
- c. What is the educational background of your parents (or guardians)?
- d. Do you have any siblings?
  - i. What order are you in the family?

- ii. Were you the first sibling to attend college?
  - e. Where did you go to college?
2. What was the college selection process like for you?

Possible Follow Up:

- a. When did you first begin to receive information on college options?
  - b. When did you first begin to receive information on the Georgia HOPE scholarship?
  - c. What information did you receive at your school and from whom?
3. What supports or barriers did you encounter while researching your options for where to go to college?

Possible Follow Up:

- a. How did these supports or barriers determine which institutions you applied to or did not apply to?
4. What supports or barriers did you encounter while researching your options for financing your college education?

Possible Follow Up:

- a. How did these supports or barriers determine which institutions you applied to or did not apply to?
5. What guidance and/or information did you receive regarding the Georgia HOPE scholarship and your options to finance college?

Possible Follow Up:

- a. What aspects of the HOPE scholarship (e.g., requirements, schools covered in the HOPE scholarship) did you learn the most about?
  - b. Were any alternatives to not using or receiving the HOPE scholarship discussed?
6. Who provided you with information regarding the Georgia HOPE scholarship (e.g., parents, guidance counselors, schools that accepted the scholarship)?

Possible Follow Up:

- a. To what extent did you feel well informed about your options for college and the HOPE scholarship?
  - b. To what extent did your HOPE scholarship information source prepare you to use or not use the scholarship?
7. What influenced your decision to attend (name of institution they attended)?

Possible Follow Up:

- a. What factor(s) do you think influenced your decision to attend (name of institution they attended) the most?
  - b. What factor(s) do you think influenced your decision to attend (name of institution they attended) the least?
8. In what ways, if any, did your HOPE scholarship influence your decision to attend (name of institution they attended)?

Possible Follow Up:

- a. Did you and your parents (or guardians) ever discuss the possibility of you not using the HOPE scholarship for your higher education?

- b. If so, how were you planning to finance your higher education?
9. What factors, if any, influenced you to attend a private or out of state institution and forego the HOPE scholarship award you received?

Possible Follow Up:

- a. Did you apply to, or consider, any private or out-of-state institutions?
  - b. If so, what factors drew you to apply to these institutions?
  - c. What factors, if any, kept you from attending these institutions?
10. If you had not received the Georgia HOPE scholarship, would you have attended (name of institution they attended)?
- a. If the Georgia HOPE scholarship covered less tuition, would you have attended (name of institution they attended)?
  - b. As far as you know, in what ways had (person/persons financing the degree) prepared to pay for your higher education degree had the Georgia HOPE scholarship applied to less tuition?
    - i. Would (person/persons financing the degree) have been prepared to cover if the HOPE scholarship offered less dollars through the scholarship?
11. Those are all the questions I have. Is there anything you'd like to add about your college selection process or the Georgia HOPE scholarship?
12. Do you have any questions for me? Thank you for your time!

## APPENDIX H

### Research Protocol – USG Attendee

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today! Through this study, I am hoping to gain a better understanding of what factors contributed to where you chose to go to college. As a student who attended (name of institution they attended) and received a Georgia HOPE scholarship after high school, your perspectives are extremely helpful for this research. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary, and you may choose to not answer any of the question or questions I may ask you today. There are no right or wrong answers. [Review consent form with participant. Obtain signatures on two copies of consent form; Give one copy to interviewee for his/her records.] Do you have any (other) questions before we begin?

#### Introductory Questions:

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.

#### Possible Follow Up:

- a. Where did you grow up?
- b. What did your parents (or guardians) do?
- c. What is the educational background of your parents (or guardians)?
- d. Do you have any siblings?
  - i. What order are you in the family?

- ii. Were you the first sibling to attend college?
  - e. Where did you go to college?
2. What was the college selection process like for you in your high school?

Possible Follow Up:

- a. What information did you receive from authority figures at your school?  
Who?
  - b. When did you first begin to receive information on college options?
  - c. When did you first begin to receive information on the Georgia HOPE scholarship?
3. What supports or barriers did you encounter while researching your options for where to go to college?

Possible Follow Up:

- a. How did these supports or barriers determine which institutions you applied to or did not apply to?
4. What supports or barriers did you encounter while researching your options for financing your college education?

Possible Follow Up:

- a. How did these supports or barriers determine which institutions you applied to or did not apply to?
5. What guidance and/or information did you receive regarding the Georgia HOPE scholarship and your options to finance college?

Possible Follow Up:

- a. What aspects of the HOPE scholarship (e.g., requirements, schools covered in the HOPE scholarship) did you learn the most about?
  - b. Were any alternatives to not using or receiving the HOPE scholarship discussed?
6. Who provided you with information regarding the Georgia HOPE scholarship (e.g., parents, guidance counselors, schools that accepted the scholarship)?

Possible Follow Up:

- a. To what extent did you feel well informed about your options for college and the HOPE scholarship?
  - b. To what extent did your HOPE scholarship information source prepare you to use or not use the scholarship?
7. What influenced your decision to attend (name of institution they attended)?

Possible Follow Up:

- a. What factor(s) do you think influenced your decision to attend (name of institution they attended) the most?
  - b. What factor(s) do you think influenced your decision to attend (name of institution they attended) the least?
8. In what ways, if any, did your HOPE scholarship influence your decision to attend (name of institution they attended)?

Possible Follow Up:

- a. Did you and your parents (or guardians) discuss the possibility of not using the HOPE scholarship for your higher education?

- b. If so, how were you planning to finance your higher education?
9. What factors, if any, do you believe influenced you to attend (name of institution they attended) and forego the HOPE scholarship award you received?

Possible Follow Up:

- a. Did you apply to, or consider, any Georgia HOPE institutions?
  - b. If so, what factors drew you to apply to these institutions?
  - c. What factors, if any, kept you from attending these institutions?
10. Those are all the questions I have. Is there anything you'd like to add about your college selection process or the Georgia HOPE scholarship?
11. Do you have any questions for me? Thank you for your time!

## APPENDIX I

### Transcript Coding Tree

#### Layer One Habitus

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- Demographics
- Availability of Resources
- College Knowledge
- Value of a College Degree

#### Layer Two High School Resources

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- Availability of Resources
- Use of Resource
- Support from Resources
- Barrier from Resources

#### Layer Three Higher Education Context

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- Marketing
- Institutional Characteristics
- Location

#### Layer Four Public Policy Context

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- HOPE Scholarship Influence

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Tierney F. Keller graduated from Rancocas Valley Regional High School, Mount Holly, New Jersey, in 2006. She received her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Delaware in 2014. She was employed as an admissions counselor at George Mason University for two years and received her Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from George Mason University in 2017. She currently works as a market research associate for the Education Advisory Board (EAB) in Washington, D.C.