The University of Chicago

Seeking Opportunity:

The Unspoken Barrier to College Enrollment for First-Generation Low-Income Students

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I humbly submit this thesis to the Public Policy department with the highest level of love for my first-generation low-income community. Upon completing this research paper, I feel enthusiastic at the prospect of developing knowledge to reduce barriers to upward mobility for my FGLI community. I am only eager to facilitate a culture of support, encouragement, and motivation for first-generation low-income students in years to come at UChicago and beyond.

Abstract

This qualitative research paper aims to understand the role of parental support in determining college enrollment outcomes for high achieving first-generation low-income students from Houston, TX. Although the current literature recognizes the economic, informational, and resource-based barriers to enrolling into a selective out-of-state college, there is a pressing gap in the literature: assessing the effect of parental support. Thus, I breakdown parental support into the following typologies: emotional apprehension, absolute assertiveness, and resource-bound support. I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with current college students and alumni of EMERGE HISD— a program that offers high achieving low-income students guidance to apply, enroll, and graduate from the nation's most selective out-of-state universities while minimizing financial burden. Consequently, I identified the following three themes in my findings: the parental shielding effect, the constructive disobedience phenomenon, and the scarcity of resources. Notably, these three themes align with the typologies of parental support. Overall, the lack of parental support often inhibited— and at times, prohibited— first-generation low-income students from enrolling into a selective out-of-state university. Because these schools offer low-income students with the greatest financial aid packages and professional earnings potential, this research aims to decrease barriers to upward mobility in the United States.

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Introduction

"I can only dream that, one day, I too may obtain the promise of a post-secondary education," I recounted as I completed the college application process four years ago. In the pursuit of upward mobility in the United States, the college selection process for first-generation low-income[1] students highlights the nuances of adversity: the courage to endure lengthy travel commutes to pursue a quality education, the responsibility of providing economic alleviation for their family, or the internalized conflict of believing that they belong in highly selective academic and professional spaces.

For many, such as myself, receiving a post-secondary education has become our passport to freedom. As the violence in our neighborhoods and incessant cycle of income inequality persist in our communities, we are motivated by the freedom of enjoying a higher quality of life upon completing an undergraduate education. Consequently, being accepted into a university— especially at the most selective institutions in the United States— is often a monumental milestone achieved by students such as ourselves. Notably, highly selective colleges and universities offer low-income students with highly generous need-based financial aid, tailored academic and career mentorship, and resources for graduating within six years (McLoughlin, 2012). Consequently, these universities, known for producing notable leadership, serve as platforms that robustly sustain upward mobility for first-generation low-income students (Ge, Isaac, and Miller, 2022; Lin, 2000).

For this thesis, I explored the following research question: *What is the effect of parental support on enrollment to a selective out-of-state college/university for urban first-generation low-income students?* Although the academic literature rightfully argues that economic factors

[1] I will use the definition of first-generation low-income student used by EMERGE. First generation indicates that a student's parents either did not receive a post-secondary degree in the USA or did not receive one at all. Furthermore, low-income indicates living in a household earning less than $65,000 per year for a household of four.

limit first-generation low-income students' access to postsecondary education (Schneider, 2015; Gibbons and Shoffner, 2004), this thesis intends to recognize the existence of parental support as a barrier in determining college enrollment outcomes. Furthermore, I aim to contextualize the typologies— emotional apprehension, absolute assertiveness, and resource-bound support— of parental support. By focusing on the student perspective, I aim to inform the body of knowledge assessing their personal adversity.

For this thesis, I interviewed 16 college students who graduated from the Houston Independent School District (HISD), the nation's eighth-largest public school district. All interviewees are alumni of EMERGE HISD, a district-wide program providing high-achieving low-income students with the informational and readiness support to attend the nation's most selective colleges and universities. Half of the interviewees attend a selective[2] out-of-state university, and the remaining eight interviewees attend a non-selective university in Texas. By exploring their perceived level of emotional support from their parents throughout the college application process, I learned about the role of familial dynamics, emotional support, and personal/economic constraints in matriculating to a selective out-of-state college/university.

After completing the interviews, I identified three key themes: the parental shielding effect, the constructive disobedience phenomenon, and the scarcity of resources. While the first two themes relate to parents' personal preferences for their children to stay in Texas for college, the third theme showcases how parental support is limited by external factors. These themes parallel the three typologies of parental support where students are inhibited— or at times, prohibited— from enrolling into a selective out-of-state university. By assessing the varying

[2] For this thesis, I will use EMERGE's definition of "selective" as having a 25% acceptance rate or lower with meeting greater than 85% of a student's demonstrated need. According to EMERGE, these schools will provide the best financial aid packages while increasing students' access to upward mobility-promising careers.

impacts of parental support, I identified the emotional, behavioral, and structural challenges experienced by first-generation low-income students.

As a brief roadmap of this paper, I firstly provide a review of the current literature on college enrollment for first-generation low-income students. By reviewing the role of social capital, poverty at the neighborhood/school levels, and the state of college admissions in the 21st century, I analyze the comprehensive factors that determine college enrollment. Afterwards, I contextualize the EMERGE program, the Houston ISD, and City of Houston population. I, then, elaborate on the decision to conduct interviews to understand the effect of parental support through the perception of students. Lastly, I provide my findings, policy recommendations, and concluding remarks inviting further research on the effect of parental support in determining college enrollment for the first-generation low-income community.

Social Capital Theory

Social capital is a key concept that is highly cited in the literature on education and upward mobility. Introduced in the late 20th century, social capital was first defined by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu— thus presenting a substantial new framework in socioeconomic development (Fukuyama, 2000; Lancee, 2012). In its original definition, social capital is defined as the "aggregate of the actual and potential resources linked to a durable network of more and less institutionalized relationships, which provide a collectively-owned capital" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21). Further interpretations of social capital have been developed to complement this original definition. Today, social capital is conceptualized as the following: 1) the quantity and/or quality of resources an individual can access or use, and 2) a network of social relations through formal and informal connections (Lancee, 2012; Lin, 2000).

Consequently, social capital may contextualize racial, gender, and socioeconomic inequality in the United States. On average, men are more likely to have nonkin members in their network— including co-workers, advisors, and friends— than women (Moore, 1987). By having a greater diversity of members in their network, men have greater access to positions of leadership, promotion, and higher salaries (Lin, 2000). Overall, the benefits of social capital are observed in career outcomes, access to exclusive hiring information, and career sponsorship (Seibert, Kraimer, and Liden, 2001).

Furthermore, these benefits are also observed when racially and economically privileged individuals are in proximity to one another (Mouw, 2003). Therefore, this produces an educational and career opportunity gap that is inaccessible to most low-income students of color (Moore, 1987). With Black and immigrant groups having the least access to high-income social networks, they may experience the greatest level of adversity in terms of leveraging social capital to promote upward mobility (Lin, 2000).

In addition to contextualizing the exclusivity of competitive jobs and upward mobility, social capital also helps explain why elite universities are highly inaccessible to first-generation low-income students (Basit 2012). Oftentimes, low-income parents are limited to simply offering verbal words of encouragement to their academically ambitious children, thus highlighting a significant social capital gap along socioeconomic lines (Basit, 2012). However, when enrolled at an elite university, underrepresented groups are exposed to a new professional networks that may elevate their socioeconomic status (Zweigenhaft, 1993). Often times, the social capital at the household level proves to be a key component of structural inequality, thus highlighting the advantages that college-educated and wealthy households have in entering or maintaining personal and professional networks (Georg, 2004).

Furthermore, the interplay of social capital within both the household and the neighborhood services as a reliable indicator of high school graduation rates, shedding light into the long-term consequences of racial and socioeconomic segregation (Coleman, 1988; Sampson 2012). When low-income students are exposed to socioeconomically diverse networks— where they receive information on applying to and navigating college— the informational gap between wealthy and low-income students decreases (Deutschlander, 2017).

As a whole, social capital helps explain how environmental context shapes access to upward mobility for first-generation low-income students. The benefits of social capital are comprehensive. By providing access to informational and professional guidance for pursuing a higher paying career, social capital is a valuable concept to help explain socioeconomic inequality. Therefore, I use social capital theory to help contextualize the resources available to first-generation low-income students as they pursue a post-secondary education.

Contextualizing Inequality

Poverty at the Neighborhood Level

Understanding communities at the neighborhood level is valuable for assessing the causalt relationships of segregation, economic development, public health, and education outcomes (Sampson, 2012). In particular, racial and socioeconomic segregation reinforces the concentration of poverty, thus reducing access to educational or economic resources (Massey and Denton, 1993; Quillian, 2012). Furthermore, the spatial design of neighborhoods often understudies patterns of inequality due to the limitations of quality of life metrics, such as WalkScore (Duncan et al. 2012).

Whereas socioeconomic segregation has no significant effect on the high school graduation rates of middle and upper-class students, it has a significant negative impact on

low-income students (Quillian, 2014). Furthermore, racial segregation has a negative effect on the high school graduation rates of poor Black or Latino students— a phenomenon not observed in white or Asian neighborhoods (Quillian 2014). Furthermore, when reviewing the root causes of income inequality, reviewing the spatial distribution of *affluence* may provide more valuable insight than the spatial distribution of *poverty* (Reardon and Bischoff, 2011). According to broader national trends, America's poor communities are increasingly segregated— in residence and economic opportunity— from the nonpoor population (Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino, 2012).

Moreover, income neighborhood segregation poses an emerging risk of acute poverty— thus detailing an urgent lack of access to employment, grocery stores, and affordable housing (Sandoval, Rank, and Hirschl, 2009). With young adolescents being exposed to concentrated poverty, they are more likely to participate in delinquent behavior (Jarjoura, Triplett, and Brinker 2002). Consequently, increasing safety concerns facilitate a feedback loop of community disinvestment (Quillian 2012). As community disinvestment inhibits access to grocery stores, children who live in food deserts obtain lower academic performance in science, reading, and mathematics than their non-food desert residing peers (Frndak, 2013). Evidently, these findings suggest that the external effects of poverty, from health to public safety, may harm the academic performance of students in low-income neighborhoods.

Poverty at the School Level

With an emerging increase of segregation at the neighborhood level, assessing its impacts on educational outcomes is imperative. When it comes to high school graduation rates, two contextual factors may help predict outcomes: social capital in both the household and high school contexts (Engberg and Wolniak, 2014). Noting that public schools are racially and socioeconomically representative of the neighborhood(s) that they serve, low SES schools often

implement “assignment regularity, an automated respect for authority, and tolerance for boredom to teach lower-class children to behave and better fit into low-paying jobs” (Allison, 1995, p. 101). The contrast in behavior expectations between low and high-income schools reinforces an educational and employment divide in the United States (Golann, 2021).

As parental involvement is associated with structured study routines and higher academic GPAs (Wang and Sheikh-Khalil, 2014), understanding the role of parents within the context of economic distress is vital. Observing that large urban secondary schools have implemented parent-student interactive homework assignments in mathematics, they have observed a notable increase in standardized test scores and familial attitudes toward school (Van Voorhis, 2013). Because educators often conflate declining parental involvement in the adolescent years as parental disinterest in the classroom (Simon, 2004), it may become easier to identify intervention entry points for schools to assist students in most need.

Nonetheless, as teachers often define parental involvement as attending in-school events, they often overlook other expressions of parental support— such as moral encouragement, personal academic advocacy, and ambivalent companionship— that promote college access for first-generation low-income students (Auerbach, 2007). With the disproportionate impact of parental intervention programs among wealthy white students versus minority, ESL, or special needs students, placing additional resources on these groups will uphold equitable education goals (Mac Iver et al. 2015). Overall, programs targeted at academic achievement in low-income schools have proven to be effective.

Selective College Admissions in the 21st Century

When low-SES high schools receive programming to assist students with *access* to college readiness, low-income students observe a noticeable increase in college enrollment

(Schneider, 2015). For many first-generation students, low confidence in college admissions is often a barrier preventing them from applying to institutions of higher learning (Gibbons and Shoffner, 2004). Consequently, this emphasizes how further assistance in promoting "self-efficacy," or belief in their academic potential, for first-generation students is imperative for closing the college access gap (Gibbons and Shoffner, 2004). Notably, high school counselors have played meaningful roles in providing college admissions and emotional support for students (O'Connor, 2018). Therefore, increasing access to high school counselors and college admissions assistance benefits first-generation low-income students the most (McKillip, Rawls, and Barry, 2012; O'Connor 2018).

Furthermore, identity-based representation has a meaningful role in the life outcomes of students from minority backgrounds (Brown and Treviño, 2013). The presence of role models is effective at inspiring, reinforcing, and helping facilitate the goals of young adolescents in an academic, professional, or personal context (Morgenroth, Ryan, and Peters, 2015). Additionally, exposure to role models in academic environments is effective at reducing the gender gap in male-dominated fields of study (Porter and Serra, 2020). With greater exposure to charismatic leaders in spaces where they are a gender or racial/ethnic minority, underrepresented students are more likely to enroll in courses or professional pipeline programs dominated by white male individuals (Morgenroth, Ryan, and Peters, 2015; Porter and Serra, 2020). As upward mobility is dependent on access to and maintenance of friendships with individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, cultivating personal relationships often elevate underrepresented students in professional and academic settings (Chetty et al. 2022).

The increasing selectivity of the nation's most respected institutions of higher learning has established a growing privilege gap between America's college-educated individuals

(Stevens, 2007). Noting that elite universities provide graduates with higher salaries than non-selective institutions (Weinstein, 2022), the professional value of an elite college degree has emerged nationwide (Kurlaender and Grodsky, 2013). With an increasing demand for a college degree, particularly from elite universities, decreasing acceptance rates have raised questions about the decreasing *access* to post-secondary education for first-generation low-income students (Bound, Hershbein, and Long, 2009). Since 1962, only the top ten percent of America's universities have witnessed a decrease in acceptance rates (Hoxby, 2009). As a whole, the increasing selectivity of these schools has concentrated social and human capital among a small percentage of Americans, thus elevating their access to higher-paying career opportunities (Ge, Isaac, and Miller, 2022).

Because elite universities are recognized for producing leaders in government, academia, and industry, these institutions offer first-generation students a new tier of social capital and network (Zimmerman, 2019). For first-generation low-income students, the benefits of attending an elite university are observed in their generous financial aid packages, tailored academic and career advancement programs, and the caliber of their network (McLoughlin, 2012). Because elite universities are more likely to offer low-income students full need-based scholarships, these students are more likely to successfully graduate from college (McLoughlin, 2012).

Nonetheless, first-generation low-income student often express feeling unsupported socially or culturally when enrolled at selective out-of-state universities (Engel and Tinto, 2008). Often feeling overwhelmed by the resources available, first-generation students at elite schools often perceive that they are unable to fully integrate into the social atmosphere of their peers (Landers, 2017). Therefore, providing emotional, professional, and academic guidance is vital

for the long-term success of first-generation low-income students in the most selective institutions of higher learning (Landers, 2017; Zimmerman, 2019).

As the US Supreme Court has ended the practice of race-based affirmative action, emerging research argues that "wealth-based" affirmative action continues to exist (Chetty, Deming, and Friedman, 2023). Given that the Ivy Plus universities (the eight Ivy League universities, Chicago, Duke, MIT, and Stanford) offer preferential admissions to wealthier students, admissions practices uphold systemic barriers to low-income minority students (Chetty, Deming, and Friedman, 2023). Because the overturning of affirmative action in college admissions fails to actively promote the representation of certain minority groups, such as Asian students, there is limited knowledge of the long-term effects of diverse representation in selective schools (Kang, 2024). Currently, an increasing share of Americans view race-based college admissions less favorably (Pew Research Center, 2023). Overall, this may highlight further obstacles to the attempt to increase diversity in the nation's elite colleges and universities.

The college admissions realm highlights the inequities that are fundamentally part of the system. In addition to lacking *access* to the social capital valuable for entry to elite universities, first-generation low-income students are met with further adversity when matriculated. Despite providing access to graduation pathways and economically advancing professions, adversity for these students is rather comprehensive. Social capital theory helps explain the networks that students are exposed to, and thus, affect their academic and professional outcomes. Inclusive of the social networks of neighborhoods, public spaces, and high schools, social capital theory informs us of the resources available to first-generation low-income students as they apply to selective colleges/universities.

Although other studies consider social capital theory, the lack of investment and resources, and economic inequality to assess barriers that prevent first-generation low-income students from attending selective out-of-state colleges, I am interested in addressing a key gap in the literature: the role of parental support in assessing enrollment to selective out-of-state universities. More specifically, I am interested in exploring the role of parental support through the opinions of college students from a first-generation low-income background. Therefore, this research aims to expand on the current literature by exploring the effect of parental support on college enrollment.

Background

For this thesis, I focused on the EMERGE HISD population of Houston, TX. The EMERGE program's mission is to "empower and equip high-achieving students from low-income communities to apply to, thrive at, and graduate from the nation's best colleges" (EMERGE, 2023). Actively focusing on selective out-of-state colleges/universities, EMERGE aims to send students to schools with the most competitive financial aid packages in the country. Currently, EMERGE is partnered with five Houston area public school districts. All 5 EMERGE-service public school districts (Houston ISD, Aldine ISD, Klein ISD, Spring Branch ISD, and Spring ISD) are based in Harris County, Texas. 99% of EMERGE's students apply to at least one selective college or university (EMERGE, 2023). Additionally, EMERGE targets students who have demonstrated high potential for being competitive college applicants. Consequently, approximately 95% of EMERGE students are accepted to at least one selective institution of higher learning— prompting 54% of scholars to matriculate to a selective institution (EMERGE, 2023).

In my research, I interviewed EMERGE alumni who graduated from a Houston ISD high school. Serving as the nation's eighth largest public school district— and the largest in Texas— Houston ISD encompasses students residing in a large urban context. Currently, roughly 79.55% of HISD students are considered economically disadvantaged (Houston ISD, 2024). Furthermore, 61.80% of students are Hispanic/Latino, 21.37% are Black, and 4.96% are Asian. (Houston ISD, 2024). Therefore, this represents that the Houston Independent School District is, on average, overwhelmingly composed of students of color. Similarly, a significant share of students are from a low-income background. Although schools may vary in socioeconomic or racial demographics, these data may contextualize the overall academic environment of interviewees.

Additionally, my focus on an urban context, specifically my hometown of Houston, TX, allows me to specialize in a region with a relatively high prominence of residents from a majority-minority low-income background. As of 2020, approximately 662,000 (or 29.3% of Houston's population), is foreign-born (US Census Bureau, 2023). Furthermore, roughly 62.9% of Houston's adult population has less than a Bachelor's Degree (US Census Bureau, 2023). Lastly, the city has a median household income of $62,637 (US Census Bureau, 2023)– which is below the national median of $80,610 (Guzman and Kollar, 2024).

Overall, this demonstrates that the Houston and HISD regions are significantly composed of low-income residents of color. Although my focus on EMERGE alumni focuses on high-performing low-income students, their socioeconomic background is well represented at the school district and city levels. Furthermore, the prominence of immigrant communities of color and low-income residents in Houston showcases a high demand for resources to promote upward mobility among residents.

Data and Methods

The participants of this study consisted of 16 EMERGE alumni currently enrolled in college. As EMERGE provides high achieving low-income students with tailored guidance and information the process of applying to college, I was interested in investigating another barrier to enrolling into a selective out-of-state college: the lack of parental support. In this thesis, I interviewed 8 students who attend a selective out-of-state college/university, and 8 students who attend a non-selective undergraduate college/university in Texas. I utilized a combination of snowball and purposive sampling to recruit participating students. Because I have a direct connection to EMERGE, I recruited participants from my personal and extended network, which consists of roughly 1,700 EMERGE alumni currently enrolled in college (EMERGE, 2023).

I interviewed all participating students through a one-on-one Zoom call using a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix A). Interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes. My interview guide was informed by the literature and personal experiences, which prompted me to articulate key concepts, topics, and observations in my line of questioning. Furthermore, my interview guide consisted of prewritten questions and probes — allowing me to ask for further details if a response was unclear or prompted my curiosity.

Before each interview, I asked each individual if I could record the conversation's audio through Zoom to be later transcribed. A pseudonym is used for each participant. After each interview, I uploaded the audio onto Microsoft Word and used its artificial intelligence capacity to transcribe it. Afterward, I corrected the audio transcription, manually coded and wrote comments on patterns consistent with the literature and across responses; after this, I destroyed the original audio files.

Upon correcting the transcripts, I conducted a thematic analysis across the findings. Coding for terms such as “parental attitudes,” “permission,” and “resources,” I assessed my data according to themes observed across the interviews. More specifically, these themes allowed me to assess the typologies— emotional apprehension, absolute assertiveness, and resource-bound attitudes— of parental support that inhibit, or prohibit, first-generation low-income students from attending a selective out-of-state university. By focusing on students’ perspectives, I was able to identify their perceived challenges when choosing between offers of college admissions.

This thematic analysis helped me understand students’ thoughts, motivations, and decisions when accepting a college admissions offer. Although students provided insight into various challenges when choosing a college, this analysis helped me identify parental support as an additional factor influencing their decisions. That is, interviewing students helped me better comprehend the effect of parental support on inhibiting or prohibiting first-generation low-income students from attending a selective out-of-state university. By focusing on their personal experiences, I was able to ask questions that helped me understand parental support within broad contexts.

Findings and Analysis

To understand the effect of parental support on first-generation low-income students’ ability to enroll into a selective out-of-state college, I identified three key themes in my findings: 1) the parental shielding effect, 2) the constructive disobedience phenomenon, and 3) the scarcity of resources. These themes encompass the three typologies of parental support and highlight their impact on enrollment into a selective out-of-state university.

Firstly, the parental shielding effect demonstrates the emotional attitudes of parents that inhibited— or at times, prohibited— first-generation low-income students from attending a

selective out-of-state university. Furthermore, the constructive disobedience phenomenon describes how certain students respond when their parents prohibit them from applying to an out-of-state college. Because the college *application* process directly impacts college *enrollment*, this theme explores the challenges of defying parental expectations in pursuit of studying at a selective out-of-state university. Lastly, the scarcity of resources theme describes how parental support is inhibited due to legal, economic, or informational challenges. Even if a parent encourages their child to attend a selective out-of-state university, the scarcity of resources restricts their ability to provide support.

Overall, assessing the effect of parental support on college enrollment helps identify a key challenge to enrolling into a selective out-of-state college for first-generation low-income students. By breaking down parental support into three typologies— emotional apprehension, absolute assertiveness, and resource-bound support— policymakers may better understand the motivations that restrict or prevent first-generation low-income students from attending a selective out-of-state university.

The Parental Shielding Effect

The parental shielding effect describes the emotional apprehension expressed by some parents of first-generation low-income students who considered *enrolling* into a selective out-of-state colleges/universities. More specifically, I describe college enrollment in the context of students already having received an offer of admissions from selective out-of-state universities. In my interviews, I identified three key emotions among parents that prompted the parental shielding effect: protectiveness, fear of leaving home, and displeasured authoritativeness.

Because the interviews were taken in the context of a first-generation low-income background, the parental shielding effect demonstrates that personal emotions— beyond socioeconomic factors— may dictate where students will enroll in college. Consequently, parents of first-generation low-income students exhibit discretionary authority when providing their children with support/permission to apply to out-of-state undergraduate programs. The following interviews help demonstrate how the parental shielding effect inhibited— and at times, prohibited— students from enrolling to a selective college outside of Texas.

Protectiveness

When Marisol, a fourth-year at Tufts University, was creating her college list, she felt contradicting levels of support from her parents. After asking her to describe the emotional support she received by her parents when applying to selective colleges/universities outside of Texas, she replied with the following:

> "At home, it was something that my Dad was cautious about. He is resistant to change, and also me being his only daughter, he's like, 'I have to take care of her.' Also, not knowing what [going out of state] looks like and what it's gonna look like for me, he was very nervous around that. He was very supportive of me going to college, but not very supportive in going outside the state before he understood the nuances of that. After he understood the nuances and talked to my mommy about it, he was very supportive." (Marisol, February 2025).

Although Marisol perceived that her father's lack of support would prevent her from attending Tufts University, her mother's ability to persuade her father demonstrates the value of personal decision-making in the household. In addition to racial and socioeconomic factors affecting the educational outcomes of low-income students (Quillian 2014), gender played a role in eliciting a sense of protectiveness in Marisol's father. Consequently, her father's protectiveness became an additional challenge Marisol faced when attempting to enroll to Tufts University.

This demonstrates that, within the context of socioeconomic and gender-based factors, protectiveness is an emotion that some parents of first-generation low-income students express. Consequently, the parental shielding effect is a phenomenon that introduces emotional challenges for these students when seeking to matriculate into an out-of-state university. Notably, the parental shielding effect did not prohibit Marisol from enrolling into an out-of-state college. Because her mother explained the benefits of attending selective university in Massachusetts to her father, Marisol eventually received the support from both of her parents to enroll into Tufts. Therefore, this implies that the parental shielding effect may be mitigated when parents are informed about the professional, academic, and economic benefits of attending a selective out-of-state university.

In contrast, the parental shielding effect prohibited other students from attending a selective out-of-state university. For Peach, a fourth-year at Trinity University in San Antonio, TX, her parents' protectiveness prevented her from leaving Texas for her undergraduate education. When reflecting on her college selection process, she described her father's lack of support as follows:

> "Oh, but my Dad? He's an immigrant, so I feel like for him, his mentality was really, like, 'you should stay close— like *close* close— by, so we can make sure you're OK.' I would just say that his concern was greater than the extra support that I personally needed, so I didn't really feel support from him." (Peach, February 2025).

Here, poverty and neighborhood context (Frndak, 2013), coupled with cultural immigrant beliefs, shaped Peach's father's protectiveness when she sought to enroll in an out-of-state university. As an immigrant, Peach's father felt inclined to protect his daughter from the uncertainty of living in a different state for college. That is, Peach implied that her father's personal challenges with navigating the social and cultural customs of the United States influenced his emotional apprehension. Fearing she would be unsafe or unprotected, the parental

shielding effect actively prohibited Peach from attending a selective out-of-state school. Although Peach was accepted to selective universities outside of Texas with highly competitive financial aid packages, she felt that her father's protectiveness was a significant factor in determining her decision to attend Trinity University.

According to the literature, concentrated spaces of poverty inhibit access to information, resources, or benefits about educational opportunities (Massey and Denton, 1993; Quillian, 2012). Unlike Marisol, Peach felt that her parents did not receive enough information to support her preference for out-of-state schools. In essence, the multitude of factors— such as socioeconomic context, gender-based opinions, and immigrant status— help contextualize the role of the parental shielding effect in the college enrollment process. While parental protectiveness may inhibit some students from enrolling into a selective out-of-state school, others are actively prohibited from enrolling into out-of-state schools. Consequently, the parental shielding effect is challenge— in addition to economic concerns— that first-generation low-income students may encounter when choosing a college.

Fear of Leaving Home

Like protectiveness, parents' fear of their children leaving home is another emotion that drives the parental shielding effect. When I asked Ashley, a third-year at the University of Chicago, about her college decision journey, she provided valuable insights into parental attitudes toward out-of-state enrollment at her high school. While her parents were supportive of her decision to attend the University of Chicago, she felt that many of her peers did not experience the same level of encouragement. Thus, I asked her whether she believed that economic or cultural factors more visibly explained parents' apprehensive attitudes. She stated the following:

> "I would say it's more cultural. As a parent, you would say, 'Oh, it's great that my child is going far and pursuing everything else at this other [state.] They're becoming this incredible person that I wanted them to be like as a parent.' But there is a cultural aspect of guilt of leaving your family behind. In the parents' point of view, they'd ask 'Why are you leaving us?'" (Ashley, February 2025).

Although the literature often credits socioeconomic factors in limiting selective college enrollment access for first-generation low-income students (Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino, 2012; Quillian, 2024), Ashley explains that cultural attitudes also inhibit students from leaving Texas for college. Notably, Ashley highlights the existence of contradicting parental interests. While parents actively want their children to grow as people, they feel conflicted when their child's growth is at the expense of leaving their home for college. According to Ashley, first-generation low-income students are often "tasked with convincing their parents that going out-of-state is okay" (Ashley, February 2025), thus emphasizing a key burden taken by these students. Because the fear of abandonment evokes an emotional burden for first-generation low-income students, these students often feel discouraged from enrolling in a selective out-of-state college. Although the parental shielding effect will not prevent every student from leaving Texas for college, it may inhibit their comfort in taking the decision to pursue higher education far from home.

Moreover, Ashley focuses on cultural attitudes eliciting the parental shielding effect. Stating that parents "culturally want their kids to stay close to home for college" (Ashley, February 2025), Ashley alluded to ideas articulated in the social capital literature. Social networks with high college graduated rates— especially from selective out-of-state universities— are often inaccessible to first-generation low-income students (Moore, 1987). Thus, parental support— or the lack thereof— may be influenced by the cultural attitudes amplified in their social networks. Because Ashley believes that parents reinforce each other's emotional apprehension toward out-of-state schools, the fear of leaving home firmly remains a communally-shared emotion among the parents of first-generation low-income students.

Although Ashley describes the parental shielding effect in the context of cultural beliefs, Cynthia, a fourth-year at Columbia University in the City of New York, describes this phenomenon in the context of familial dynamics. When I inquired about her parents' apprehension about her enrollment to Columbia, she stated that they felt a "loss of their home and culture [where] taking away their child is something that's like— It's hard for to not project their feelings onto their children" (Cynthia, March 2025). Here, Cynthia's parents felt a strong emotional attachment to their child. While communal attitudes had a more subtle impact on her parents' emotional apprehension, Cynthia explains that personal preferences for maintaining the family unit triggered a negative reaction from them. Consequently, Cynthia faced the challenge of navigating her parents' fear in pursuit of enrolling into an out-of-state school. Although Cynthia ultimately enrolled at Columbia University, the parental shielding effect prompted a barrier that inhibited her emotional comfort in leaving Texas— and more specifically, her family— for her undergraduate studies in New York.

Displeasured Authoritativeness

When assessing parental emotions toward their children leaving Texas for college, a third attitude emerged: displeasured authoritativeness. This attitude exhibits an appeal to authority to express unequivocal opposition to out-of-state enrollment. While other apprehensive emotions can be mitigated through familial communication, the displeasured authoritativeness attitude firmly intends to prohibit first-generation low-income students from enrolling into a college outside of Texas. Consequently, the parental shielding effect poses a strong emotional challenge to first-generation low-income students who seek academic opportunities outside of Texas.

Heinrick, a second-year student at Texas A&M University, felt that his parents' authoritative decision to keep him close to home significantly impacted his life outcomes.

Because his parents would tell him that “I want you close to home, and that is final” (Heinrick, March 2025), he perceived that his parents failed to listen to his personal concerns when choosing which college he should enroll into. Although EMERGE requires that parents sign a document indicating an openness to attending out-of-state undergraduate programs, he felt that his parents were going back on their word. Stating that his parents believed that a son must be ready to “develop the labor skills of a man” (Heinrick, March 2025), Heinrick’s enrollment to Texas A&M University was heavily influenced by local cultural beliefs.

Furthermore, Heinrick implied that his parents’ church, where the majority of members come from a lower-education modest income household, played a significant role in reinforcing his parents’ gender-cultural beliefs. Because very few, if any, parishioners received a post-secondary education, Heinrick believes that conservative beliefs about male gender roles are actively reinforced among the church community— alluding to the role of social capital in influencing community-level beliefs about education (Deutschlander, 2017; Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino, 2012; Wildhagen, 2009). Hence, Heinrick believes that his local community influenced his parents' authoritative attitudes against attending college. As a result, the parental shielding effect actively prevented him from attending other selective out-of-state schools, despite them offering him competitive financial aid packages.

In a very similar light, Miriam, a second-year student at Brown University, noticed a difference between the support she received from her parents and that of others. Although Miriam’s parents actively supported her decision to attend Brown, she described that one of her friends[3]— and EMERGE cohort member— was actively prohibited from leaving Texas for college. Miriam’s description is as follows:

[3] I attempted to interview this individual; however, her limited availability prevented her from sharing her experience for this thesis.

> "Her dad had just told her, 'No, if you're going to study, you're gonna study here.' And so very early on, she felt caged by this restriction, and thus it made her try less. She would verbally say, 'Why should I study more for this test? I can just get a C and know I'll get into the University of Houston. Like, that's my only option.' And she did end up applying to out-of-state schools, but regardless of the decision coming out as a yes or no, she wasn't going to be able to go because her dad had already set her with a 'you can't go'" (Miriam, March 2025).

In this context, the parental shielding effect did not simply limit where Miriam's friend enrolled for college; it also affected her academic performance, and subsequently, her self esteem. Because the EMERGE program is selective, Miriam's friend expressed the academic and leadership potential to be a competitive applicant for out-of-state universities. However, her father's expression of displeasured authoritativeness hindered Miriam's friend's confidence in her academics and college-decision outcomes. Despite receiving some offers of admissions at out-of-state universities with competitive financial aid packages, the parental shielding affected where Miriam's friend would attend college: the University of Houston.

Notably, Miriam described that her friend was unable to converse with her father regarding the financial and professional benefits of attending an out-of-state college. While the parental shielding effect— in the context of emotional protectiveness and the fear of a child leaving home— enabled some parents to ultimately support their children in attending an out-of-state school, the displeasured authoritativeness attitude does not offer the same flexibility. This demonstrates that, in some cases, the parental shielding effect may firmly prohibit a child from enrolling in—or even discussing the prospect of—a selective out-of-state college. Despite efforts to inform her parents about full-scholarship programs available through out-of-state programs, Miriam's friend felt that her father's appeal to authority prevented her from pursuing her education elsewhere.

Constructive Disobedience

While I explained the parental shielding effect in the context of *enrolling* into a college after receiving an admissions offer, I describe the constructive disobedience phenomenon in the context of *applying* to college. Because my research question focuses on college *enrollment*, I was interested in observing a key factor that determines this outcome: parental permission in the context of *applying* to college. Thus, the constructive disobedience phenomenon takes place in context of the absolute assertiveness typology of parental support.

Here, I define constructive disobedience as a response exhibited by first-generation low-income students whose parents exhibited concerns most similar to the displeasured authoritativeness attitude. More specifically, the constructive disobedience phenomenon refers to certain students who apply to out-of-state undergraduate programs despite explicit or implicit parental disapproval. Although personal traits may have inclined certain students to constructively disobey their parents, I focused on their attitudes regarding the decision to apply to a selective out-of-state university. In other words, this phenomenon determines where first-generation low-income students will apply to, and subsequently enroll, for college.

Stephanie, a fourth-year student at the University of Texas at Dallas, stated that her parents prohibited her from applying to out of state schools— particularly in the Early Decision round. Determined to pursue the best education possible, she constructively disobeyed her parents. When I asked her about how she navigated applying to Wellesley College without her parents' permission, she stated the following:

> "If I make a big scene, they will feel embarrassed enough. They'll feel embarrassed enough that they'll let me apply because in Asian, especially Chinese culture, the power of losing face shame is a really good way to change people's actions. That's probably the only reason I applied out-of-state for Early Decision" (Stephanie, March 2025).

After applying, Stephanie was accepted into Wellesley through the Early Decision application round. Although financial reasons ultimately motivated her to choose the University of Texas at Dallas— which offered her a full merit-based scholarship— her decision to constructively disobey her parents granted her more agency in choosing a college. Because Wellesley would require her to pay roughly $2,000 per semester, she assessed that UT Dallas would be a more financially salient option. However, her decision to apply to Wellesley allowed to actively choose the University of Texas at Dallas— as opposed to being obligated by her parents.

Notably, Stephanie described using her culture's values to encourage her parents to accept the fact that she would apply to Wellesley in the Early Decision round. While her parents disapproved of her desire to study outside of Texas, she felt that cultural shame would prompt her parents to support her decision to apply to Wellesley. This demonstrates that Stephanie, like other first-generation low-income students, may be tasked with navigating uncomfortable dilemmas with their parents. From the threat of public shame to the act of defying parental expectations, the constructive disobedience phenomenon highlights the challenges that first-generation students encounter when pursuing their academic and professional goals.

Similarly, Cynthia did not feel supported by her parents when she was applying to the QuestBridge National College Match Scholarship— a binding admissions program that provides low-income students with full scholarships through a match process. Because her parents would have not permitted her to apply to an out-of-state school, she proceeded to apply to Columbia via QuestBridge behind their back. She stated the following:

> "I never asked for permission and I feel like I never needed it. Because what if I had asked them? They would have said no. But me telling them that I already did [apply to Columbia], they have to support me at that point. I always presented [academic opportunities] to them after I had already gotten them. I didn't tell them I was applying to

> Columbia until I got in. That's what I'm saying, you know, like you have no choice but to support me at this point" (Cynthia, March 2025).

Unlike Stephanie, Cynthia constructively disobeyed her parents in a different manner. Whereas Stephanie used external forces to compel her parents to let her apply to Wellesley, Cynthia used an internal strategy to allow her to apply to Columbia: remaining silent. While the literature often describes parents' involvement as providing academic support to their children (Wang and Sheikh-Khalil, 2014), Cynthia details that her parents' limited support inherently contributed to her receiving a full scholarship to Columbia University.

Consequently, by remaining silent about her ambition to attend a selective out-of-state school, she would minimize the mental burden of persuading her parents to let her apply to an out-of-state college. Although her parents would have not supported her decision to apply to Columbia, Cynthia's decision to remain silent about her constructive disobedience ultimately allowed her to pursue her studies at an Ivy League school. Similarly, upon receiving an acceptance letter, Cynthia was able to convince her parents of the benefits of studying at Columbia— denoting that parental permission is often a key barrier in determining where students will apply to college.

Similarly, Ariana, a first-year student at Northwestern University, felt that constructive disobedience was essential to pursuing a post-secondary education. Notably, Ariana's eldest brother, an EMERGE alumni, did not receive his parents' support to enroll in an out-of-state university. Consequently, he attended and graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with significant loans. Learning from her eldest brother's experience, Ariana felt inclined to constructively disobey her parents to pursue an education at non-Texas schools. When I asked about navigating the disagreement with her parents, she said that she told her parents the following:

> "I'm trying to leave the state no matter what. Like, I've applied to as many out-of state-colleges [and] as many scholarships as possible. I'm trying to get the money because I don't want you to be the one suffering because I am trying to go out-of-state" (Ariana, March 2025).

Because Ariana's parents disapproved of her inclination to study at an out-of-state university, she believed that applying for the QuestBridge National College Match without her parents' permission would offer greater educational and professional opportunities. Notably, Ariana's parents seemed concerned about the financial uncertainty of attending an out-of-state school. Although Ariana intended to educate her parents about the prospect of a full-ride scholarship through QuestBridge, her parents would reminder that "you're not getting out of state" (Ariana, March 2025). Consequently, by constructively disobeying her parents' firm stance of staying in Texas for college, Ariana was able to receive a full scholarship to Northwestern.

Moreover, Ariana's context describes two key challenges faced by first-generation students: providing her family with economic relief and navigating parental discouragement. Ariana believes that low-income families perceive out-of-state universities to be financially risky— even if they provide students with greater financial support than public state universities (McLoughlin, 2012). While low-income students seek economic stability for their families and overcome parental discouragement, the constructive disobedience phenomenon is an instrumental action that advances educational opportunities. Thus, first-generation low-income students may engage in constructive disobedience when their parents are uninformed about the academic, professional, and economic benefits of selective out-of-state universities.

While the constructive disobedience phenomenon prompts first-generation low-income students to apply to universities with generous financial assistance, not every student is successful. While Isabella, a fourth-year at Wellesley College, felt fully supported by her parents when applying to Wellesley, she believed she was the exception at her Title I high school. More

specifically, one of Isabella's friends[4] attempted to constructively disobey her parents in order to pursue a full-tuition scholarship through POSSE— only to be later caught by her parents. When I asked Isabella to explain further, she described the following:

> "We were both almost into the finalist process, but she did ultimately end up dropping it because her parents were like, 'You're not going to go to out-of-state. You need to stay in Houston. What are you doing?' So she did end up dropping it. She ended up going to an amazing school in Houston. She already graduated. She's doing great. But I do think that the option was kind of cut for her" (Isabella, March 2025).

Because Isabella's friend understood the financial benefits of applying to college through the POSSE, she constructively disobeyed her parents. Although some parents may eventually support their child's decision to attend an out-of-state school, not every parent makes that shift. Here, Isabella's friend made the attempt to apply to out-of-state schools via the POSSE program despite not having her parents' permission. However, once they learned that she applied for the scholarship program, they immediately compelled her to withdraw her application. As her parents felt betrayed and disrespected by her disobedience, they refused to engage in further conversations about the long-term economic benefits of pursuing the program. Thus, this supports the notion that the constructive disobedience phenomenon may arise when parents have limited awareness about the benefits of selective out-of-state universities.

Importantly, the constructive disobedience phenomenon describes a key action taken by some first-generation low-income students: they take the initiative to *apply* to out-of-state universities. In essence, constructive disobedience intends to increase the probability of enrolling into a selective out-of-state university by leading students to submit applications to these schools. Even if parents impede their children from *enrolling* in an out-of-state university— as described by the parental shielding effect— constructive disobedience results in first-generation

[4] Although I was originally interested in interviewing this individual, her busy schedule prevented her from coordinating a meeting time for this thesis.

low-income students *applying* to these schools. Overall, the constructive disobedience phenomenon is a challenging decision actively made by first-generation low-income students to further advance their professional and academic goals at a selective out-of-state university.

Scarcity of Resources

In addition to the parental shielding effect and the constructive disobedience phenomenon, a third theme emerged among my findings: the scarcity of resources. Unlike the first two concepts— which focus on parental support based on personal or emotional preferences for in-state colleges— the scarcity of resources concept focuses on parental support in relation to external factors. More specifically, it recognizes the informational, economic, and legal challenges that limit parents from supporting their children when applying or enrolling to selective out-of-state colleges— even if they actually want their children to attend these schools. Thus, the scarcity of resources is observed in the context of the resource-bound typology of parental support.

For example, Armando, a third-year at Stanford University, felt that his parents' limited knowledge about higher education in the United States initially discouraged him in the college enrollment process. When he expressed his interest in attending universities outside of Texas, his parents first reacted by stating that "well, we have a college right here." (Armando, February 2025). Because EMERGE helped inform his parents about the professional and financial benefits of attending Stanford, Armando demonstrates that external programs, such as EMERGE, are valuable in minimizing parental discouragement.

That is, prior to EMERGE's support, Armando perceived that his parents would have been less inclined to support his decision to attend Stanford. Fearing his parents would shut the

conversation with a "stay with us, save money, and we'll give you all of the *chilaquiles*[5] that you want" (Armando, February 2025), Armando initially felt discouraged by his family. However, after learning about the generous financial assistance offered by Stanford, Armando's parents promptly encouraged him to enroll there. This showcases that, when parents receive information about need-based financial aid programs, first-generation low-income students are less likely to be inhibited from attending an out-of-state university.

Furthermore, other examples describe how scarce information about the college application process may restrict parents from fully supporting their children as they seek to pursue an out-of-state program. When I asked Miriam about her parents' involvement when applying to Brown, she stated the following: "I'm gonna be honest with you. Nothing. I remember the only thing they actually were involved with was FAFSA" (Miriam, March 2025). Although Miriam's parents offered their daughter emotional support when applying to the Ivy League school, they were limited in the type of support they could provide. While college-educated parents may offer their children emotional support, informational guidance, and access to professional mentorship as they apply to college (Seibert, Kramer, and Liden, 2001), the parents of first-generation low-income students are often only able to provide emotional words of encouragement to their children (Basit, 2012). Nonetheless, Miriam felt that her parents' emotional support made her more comfortable with deciding to matriculate at Brown University.

Similarly, Mario, a fourth-year student at the University of Texas at Austin, also felt that his parents were only able to provide emotional support when considering selective out-of-state colleges for enrollment. Stating that his parents "encouraged me to make the most of myself through college" (Mario, March 2025), Mario felt appreciation toward the limited support his

[5] Chilaquiles are a traditional breakfast dish served in Mexican households.

parents could provide. Because his parents “weren't really involved in the application process since they didn't know what a personal statement was or any of those technical things” (Mario, March 2025), Mario lacked the informational guidance that several of his peers obtained.

Here, both Miriam and Mario are disadvantaged relative to their peers with college-educated parents, for parents of first-generation low-income students are often unable to provide professional and strategic guidance in the college application process (Seibert, Kramer, and Liden, 2001). While first-generation students heavily depend on high school programs— like EMERGE— and counselors to assist them with applying to college (Mac Iver et al. 2015), wealthier students may receive informational guidance from both these sources and their families (Engberg and Wolniak, 2014). Consequently, the scarcity of informational resources helps contextualize the challenges that first-generation low-income students navigate when making informed decisions about where they should apply and enroll for college. Even though some students may still enroll in a selective out-of-state college despite limited resources, this theme highlights the challenges they face when discussing their decision with their parents.

Moreover, legal matters also inhibited the support Mario’s parents could provide him when evaluating his college offers of admission. Although he received admissions offers from selective colleges outside of Texas, the scarcity of legal and economic resources ultimately led Mario to choose the University of Texas at Austin. While discussing the challenges he endured when choosing between undergraduate programs, he stated the following:

> “I, myself, am a DACA recipient, so that also played a huge role in where I would go to college. Some of these colleges don't fund undocumented students. And luckily, for UT, there is funding. That was always something in the back of my mind because, otherwise, I may have been ineligible to attend college. I know that in other states people don't typically go to college just because of [DACA] funding ineligibility” (Mario, March 2025).

For Mario, economic concerns of college affordability, coupled with legal considerations regarding immigration, prevented him from enrolling into a selective out-of-state college. Despite his parents emotionally supporting his desire to pursue studies outside of Texas, these structural barriers limited him to choose between in-state public universities— ultimately landing him at the University of Texas at Austin. Notably, Mario's status as a DACA recipient highlights a key aspect of his adversity. While other high achieving first-generation students decide between attending an in- or out-of-state university, Mario faces a more significant challenge— his economic and immigration status could have prevented him from attending college at all.

Therefore, the scarcity of resources helps contextualize the barriers that prevented Mario from attending any of the selective out-of-state colleges where he was accepted. More specifically, the structural challenges of affording college expenses or an immigration lawyer inhibited his parents from supplying the resources to attend an out-of-state college. Despite granting their son permission and the emotional support to leave Texas for college, Mario's parents were bound by the legal and economic challenges of being an undocumented family. Consequently, the scarcity of resources may prevent parents from fully supporting their children's desire to attend an out-of-state college— even if they actively encourage their children to follow their academic aspirations.

In a very similar light, Carlos felt constrained by federal immigration policy when he applied to college. Currently, he is a second-year at the University of Texas at Austin. Due to economic and personal circumstances, he took a gap year during the 2023-2024 academic year. Furthermore, he is actively seeking to transfer from UT Austin into a Houston-area university to complete his undergraduate studies. Affected by the unpredictability of immigration policy under

the second Trump administration, Carlos currently feels obligated to remain physically close to his family. When inquired about his desire to return to Houston, he replied with the following:

> "It's definitely a priority to be in Houston right now of because the whole immigration situation going on around the country. Worst case scenario, even if my parents are both deported, I have younger siblings, so it's better for me to be here and be able to take care of them immediately rather than having to worry about coming back later from Austin" (Carlos, March 2025).

In addition to feeling the obligation to elevate his family out of poverty, Carlos feels mentally prepared— as the eldest child— to become the provider and guardian for his little siblings in the case that his parents get deported from the United States. Although Carlos's parents encouraged him accept to accept his admissions offer at a selective out-of-state university, economic and legal challenges led him to enroll at the University of Texas at Austin. Even if programs, like EMERGE, would help explain the academic and professional benefits of a selective out-of-state university, the structural challenges of poverty, coupled with considerations tied to immigration, prevented Carlos from leaving Texas for college.

Therefore, the scarcity of resources limited the college enrollment choices that Carlos made. Because Carlos's parents are undocumented immigrants, they feel legally vulnerable as they fear being deported under the current Trump administration. Aware of risks tied to his parents' immigration status, Carlos prioritized his family's needs when deciding which college to attend. Furthermore, Carlos's fear that his parents will be deported has motivated him to transfer to a Houston-based university. Although Carlos currently goes to an in-state university, he feels that his family's immigration context compels him to remain even closer to home. Consequently, the scarcity of resources actively discourages Carlos from leaving Houston for college— even though his parents emotionally supported his desire to attend a selective out-of-school university.

Policy Recommendations

Upon assessing my findings, I have identified two strategies that may encourage parents to support their children as they seek to attend a selective out-of-state university. By focusing on short- and long-term plans, I aim to provide recommendations that sustainably promote college access and upward mobility for the first-generation low-income community. While these recommendations are particularly relevant to urban settings, they can serve as a foundation for fostering parental support to help first-generation low-income students pursue their studies at a selective out-of-state university.

Short-Term

According to the parental shielding effect, parents express emotional concerns that discourage their children from attending a selective out-of-state university. In addition to economic considerations, the parental shielding effect demonstrates that parental emotional attitudes are also a factor determine college enrollment outcomes for first-generation low-income students. Similarly, the constructive disobedience phenomenon indicates that parental permission also hinders students' ability to apply, and subsequently, comfortably enroll into a selective out-of-state university. Since the parental shielding effect and constructive disobedience phenomenon illustrate personal attitudes toward out-of-state colleges, I aim to influence these preferences in a way that encourages students to pursue education at these institutions.

Therefore, I recommend creating a neighborhood art campaign that highlights the testimonials of first-generation low-income families who attended a selective out-of-state university. Because concentrated poverty limits access to information, resources, and the emotional reassurance of leaving home for college (Massey and Denton, 1993; Quillian, 2012), increasing exposure to personal testimonials through art may address the information gap. According to the literature, America's low-income neighorhoods are increasingly segregated

from the nonpoor population (Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino, 2012). As first-generation low-income students may seldomly be exposed to peers who attend college— and more specifically, a selective out-of-state university— parents may feel emotional and personal apprehension to let their students attend these schools. Consequently, increasing exposure to family testimonials of attending an out-of-state college may help increase parental support.

When installing neighborhood art murals sharing families' testimonies, I recommend placing them in spaces of high visibility. By installing murals near common rendezvous points— such as neighborhood parks, main road intersections, or grocery stores— I am keen on establishing a sense of representation through public art. Here, I advise that murals include the following: portraits of the student and their parent(s)/guardian(s), a short quote from the student and parent/guardian, and the college of enrollment. By using the testimonials of peer neighborhood residents, families may feel visually and culturally represented in spaces of higher education— recognizing that the lack of identity-based representation hinders educational outcomes of low-income minority students (Brown and Treviño, 2013).

Long-Term

In the long-run, I would advise that governmental institutions promote economic desegregation by developing walkable "third spaces" in urban neighborhoods. According to the literature, economic mobility is attained through social capital and personal friendships/relationships (Chetty et al. 2022). More specifically, personal relationships allow low-income families to 1) feel emotionally encouraged and 2) obtain access to academic/professional guidance to obtain upward mobility. Due to the increasing socioeconomic segregation of American urban neighborhoods (Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino, 2012), low-income students currently have limited access to the social capital that may ease access to social

mobility. Therefore, increasing the frequency of interactions, and relationships, of families from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds may facilitate access to upward mobility.

Upon the socioeconomic desegregation of American urban neighborhoods, I would encourage developing walkable third spaces. According to the urbanist literature, third spaces are environments that facilitate community engagement besides the home and work/academic environments (Moles, 2017). More specifically, I advise creating third spaces that would minimize cost of consumption— often a barrier to entry for low-income families. By making third spaces accessible through walking, low-income families would not feel obligated to sacrifice the cost of gasoline, public transportation, or their time to engage with community spaces.

By creating open neighborhood plazas, gardens, and affordable cafes, these third spaces would provide places for residents from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to engage with one another. As these public places may provide a conversational stimulus— such as nature, public art/music, or the expression of culture— the socioeconomic desegregation of urban neighborhoods may facilitate relationships that promote access to enrolling into a selective out-of-state college, and subsequently, obtaining upward mobility.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I assessed the effect of parental support on first-generation low-income students' ability to enroll into a selective out-of-state college. By exploring the three typologies of *parental support*— emotional apprehension, absolute assertiveness, and resource-bound support— I identified this concept as a key barrier to college enrollment. Therefore, by recognizing that first-generation low-income students are often challenged by parental support, policymakers could make a more informed decision regarding access to upward mobility.

Firstly, the parental shielding effect represents the emotional apprehension typology of parental support. In my interviews, the parental shielding effect inhibited— and at times, prohibited— first-generation low-income students from enrolling into a selective out-of-state university. Depicted by 1) protectiveness, 2) the fear of their children leaving home, and 3) displeasured authoritativeness, these emotions encompass the parental shielding effect. Notably, 1) parental protectiveness and 2) the fear of their children leaving home have the potential to inhibit or prohibit first-generation students from attending an out-of-state college.

More specifically, these emotions made some students emotionally uncomfortable when accepting their admissions offer at a selective college outside of Texas— thus inhibiting the enrollment process. Furthermore, other students felt that their parents' fear and protectiveness actively prevented them from enrolling into a selective out-of-state college. In contrast, the displeasured authoritativeness attitude does not simply inhibit students from leaving Texas for college; it firmly prevents them from enrolling. Although the displeasured authoritativeness attitude is very similar to the absolute assertiveness typology of parental support, I describe this parental emotion in the context of students who received admissions offers from selective out-of-state colleges.

These findings are consistent with the literature of low-income students living in disadvantaged and underinvested neighborhoods. Because low-income parents have limited access to individuals who have attended a selective out-of-state university (Basit, 2012; Deutschlander, 2017; Georg, 2004), they are more likely to discourage their children from leaving Texas for college. Notably, for some parents, learning about the financial, academic, and professional benefits of selective out-of-state universities prompted them to encourage their children to pursue their studies beyond Texas. For others, the parental shielding effect firmly

discouraged students from leaving Texas for college— even after receiving a competitive financial aid package from these schools. Therefore, this demonstrates that the parental shielding effect— in addition to economic or resource constraints— may discourage or prevent first-generation low-income students from attending a selective out-of-state college.

Secondly, the constructive disobedience phenomenon describes actions taken when parents of first-generation low-income students prevent their children from *applying*— and subsequently, enrolling— to a selective out-of-state college. Taking into account the absolute assertiveness typology of parental support, the constructive disobedience phenomenon occurs in cases where 1) parents do not provide their children with permission to apply and attend a selective out-of state school, and 2) their children actively disobey their parents.

Because college applications are a prerequisite for determining where students attend college, I actively examined this typology to explore the comprehensive factors influencing college enrollment. Although the literature argues that increasing access to information, confidence, economic resources helps low-income students matriculate into an undergraduate program (McKillip, Rawls, and Barry, 2012; O'Connor, 2018; Schneider, 2015; Schoffner, 2004), the constructive disobedience phenomenon describes that the assertiveness typology of parental support is also a key factor worth considering. Even though some students were successful in constructively disobeying their parents, not every student was successful in this dimension— even if they attempted to inform their parents about the financial, academic, and professional benefits of studying at a selective out-of-state college. Therefore, the constructive disobedience phenomenon is a step that some low-income students take to overcome the absolute assertiveness typology of parental support.

Lastly, the scarcity of resources responds to external factors that inhibit parents' ability to support their children as they seek to attend an out-of-state university. Even if parents actively encourage their children to pursue their undergraduate studies outside of Texas, the scarcity of informational, economic, and legal resources inhibits their ability to support their children. For some students, their parents' lack of information about the college enrollment process— from completing an application to submitting FAFSA documentation— may be a challenge worth considering. For other students, affordability considerations, coupled with legal challenges regarding immigration, limit their parents' ability to support their desire to attend an out-of-state college. By understanding these factors, policymakers may better understand the challenges that low-income families face when navigating the college matriculation process.

While the emotional apprehension and absolute assertiveness typologies address parents' personal preferences for keeping their children in Texas for college, the resource-bound typology represents the external challenges that limit parental support. Thus, students may experience the scarcity of resources differently. While the scarcity of informational resources may inhibit some students' ability to enroll into a selective out-of-state college, the scarcity of legal and economic resources may prohibit a student from leaving Texas. Notably, students with an undocumented background fear the uncertainty of deportation. Consequently, this prevents them from pursuing their studies at a selective out-of-state university— even if they receive competitive financial aid packages.

The findings in the scarcity of resources aligns most closely with the current literature on barriers to college enrollment for first-generation low-income students. As wealthier students have access to informational and professional resources to attend a selective out-of-state college, first-generation low-income students are at a disadvantage (Coleman, 1998; Georg, 2004).

Furthermore, neighborhoods with a higher concentration of poverty offer limited economic and legal resources to low-income families (Engberg and Wolniak, 2014). Because the academic literature comprehensively describes how informational, economic, and legal challenges prevent low-income students attending college (Brown and Treviño, 2013; Chetty et al. 2022; Gibbons and Shoffner, 2004; Schneider, 2015), the scarcity of resources strongly corroborates the academic literature. Notably, in rare exceptions, some low-income DACA recipients may be ineligible for financial aid at certain selective out-of-state colleges— thus challenging the literature claiming that these schools offer the most competitive financial aid packages to low-income students (Chetty et al. 2023; McLoughlin, 2012).

Overall, this thesis aims to 1) identify an additional barrier that inhibits, or at times, prohibits, high achieving first-generation low-income students from attending a selective out-of-state university and 2) understand the typologies under said barrier. The current literature robustly recognizes the economic and resource-based challenges of enrolling into a selective out-of-state university. Consequently, my focus on parental support, and its respective typologies, may further inform policymakers and the academic community about the challenges experienced by first-generation low-income students who view selective out-of-state universities as an opportunity to seek upward mobility. Although the typologies of parental support may, at times, overlap with one another, this concept provides further context into the college enrollment experience of the first-generation community.

A key limitation of this research is the sample size of interviewees. Although I interviewed a total of 16 college students— 8 from non-selective in-state universities and 8 from a selective out-of-state college— I believe that a larger sample size could provide more details into the factors that determine parental support. Within my interviews, students shared that

personal identities— such as gender, racial/ethnic identity, and immigration status— may have influenced parental support. In order to protect the privacy and confidentiality of interviewees, I omitted their racial/ethnic background.[6] Nonetheless, a wider sample size— with a key focus on these identities within the context of first-generation low-income students— may further contextualize the degrees of parental support that a parent may offer.

Additionally, another key limitation in my research is the variable of time. At the time of starting and completing this research, high school seniors have yet to finalize the college they will enroll to. Therefore, by interviewing EMERGE alumni currently enrolled in college, I was able to obtain 1) relatively recent findings assessing the effect of parental support and 2) a concrete outcome informing where each interviewee enrolled for college. To mitigate this limitation in my research, I recommend that future research explores younger generations. By doing this, the literature may further explore how parental support may evolve over time.

Although I investigated the effect of parental support in the context of high achieving students, this concept may observed in the general first-generation low-income community. Because EMERGE focuses on high achieving students by providing informational and mentorship guidance, I was able to isolate parental support as a factor that determines college enrollment outcomes. Nonetheless, I strongly advise the academic community to investigate the parental shielding effect among first-generation low-income students who 1) are not academically high achieving and 2) do not receive additional guidance by programs like EMERGE. As EMERGE scholars and alumni are privileged enough to receive the guidance to enroll into a selective out-of-state university, I believe that the broader first-generation low-income community may benefit by further understanding the effects of parental support in a

[6] To maximize the comprehensiveness of my findings, I interviewed students from diverse racial/ethnic, gender, and neighborhood contexts in Houston. Although the 3 typologies were observed among all interviewed students, providing a larger sample size may provide more nuanced details.

broader context. Consequently, the community may obtain a greater possibility of obtaining upward mobility in the United States.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide: EMERGE Scholar in College

[Confirm permission to record; otherwise, use paper to take notes]

Firstly, I would like to introduce the purpose of this interview briefly! I am hoping to learn more about your role as a student who navigated through college application trajectory, what thoughts you had in mind, and what influenced your thoughts. You do not have to answer any questions that you don't feel comfortable answering, and I will not use your name or anyone else's name you might mention. Before we start, do you have any questions or areas of concern?

1. To start off, tell me about **where you lived and who you lived with while in high school**.
    a. Probes: Affordability concerns, context on neighborhood, quality of amenities (parks, schools, grocery stores, recreational spaces), safety, segregation, and the number of siblings who underwent college admissions process. Check how long they have lived in the neighborhood – leave space for questions if moved from elsewhere

2. Wonderful! Firstly, I would love to learn about **the context of your neighborhood**!
    a. Probes: Average level of education and income, assess the local level of social capital

3. **Where did you attend high school**? How **far is was from where you live**?
    a. Probes: Relationship with the opportunity cost of commuting and academics/extracurriculars; ask if they have sufficient time to spend with family/children, balancing academics/ECs, etc.

4. **What extracurricular activities** were you a part of?
    a. Probes: Assessment of leadership level, strategy to being competitive in college applications, time dedicated to ECs

5. What factors did you consider when **selecting a high school for yourself**?
    a. Probes: How did conversations function (student vs parent input), proximity, quality of academics, evaluation criteria, definition of a *quality* program

6. How would you assess your **high school's culture concerning applying to college?**
    a. Probes: Was college an expectation? How did your peers and parents feel about applying out of state?

7. Did you feel that you or any of your peers were ever **discouraged from either applying out of state** or applying to college overall?
    a. Who? Parents? Peers? How did this affect their academic or extracurricular performance?

8. What **level of involvement** did your parent(s) have with your high school and academics?
    a. Probes: Attending parent-teacher conferences, reviewing course schedule (if at all), grades, attendance, communication with administration

9. I'm going to transition a bit into discussing how you navigated the college application and enrollment process. Because you were/are in EMERGE, what **thoughts or concerns** came to mind when you were choosing a college/university?
    a. Probes: Distance, financial aid, safety, meeting needs (economic or social) in the household

10. Did you have a preference for **where you should attend school**?
    a. Probe: Ask for dream school and rationale behind this; in Houston, state or out-of-state?

11. What factors are **were important to you** in terms of selecting a college/university?
    a. Probes: Job security, distance, affordability, safety, prestige

12. When you hear the term **selective out-of-state college**, what three words come to mind?

Now I will transition to covering how you relate and share these concerns with your parent.

13. Did your parent(s) give you **permission to apply** to a selective out-of-state school?
    a. "does not support," "leans unsupportive," "leans supportive," and "supportive."
    b. Why? Any exceptions? Thoughts or hesitations?

14. Did your parent(s) **permit you to attend** a selective out-of-state school once you get accepted?
    a. "does not support," "leans unsupportive," "leans supportive," and "supportive."
    b. Why? Any exceptions? Thoughts or hesitations?

15. Do you believe your parent(s) are **informed** of how you would answer the previous two questions? Have they **explicitly communicated** your thoughts with them?
    a. How was this communicated? Do they think you feel supported?

16. Overall, how would you assess your decision to enroll into your current college/university?

Those are all of the questions that I have prepared for today. Thank you so much for taking the time to help us learn more about your role as a student in the college application trajectory. Before we go, I was hoping to check in to see if there was anything else we haven't discussed that you believe would be helpful for me to know – either about you, your experience with understanding parental expectations, what is often overlooked, or anything else. [Pause.] Thank you again for your time. Take care!