



5-2022

## **College is a scam full of leftist liberal ideas: An exploration of rural and first-generation college students' memorable messages about higher education**

Margaret Keene

*University of Tennessee, Knoxville, mkeene1@utk.edu*

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Margaret Keene entitled "College is a scam full of leftist liberal ideas: An exploration of rural and first-generation college students' memorable messages about higher education." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Communication and Information.

Emily A. Paskewitz, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Emily Paskewitz, John Haas, Shea Kidd Brown

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

College is a scam full of leftist liberal ideas: An exploration of rural and first-generation college students' memorable messages about higher education

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Science  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Margaret Grace Keene

May 2022

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to analyze the influence Vocational Anticipatory Socialization (VAS) and memorable messages have on rural first-generation college students' interest in higher education. This study will utilize methodology regarding Vocational Anticipatory Socialization Messages and Sources from Powers and Myers (2017), the College Influence Choice Scale from Martin and Dixon (1991), as well as thematic analysis derived from survey questions designed by the researcher. The results of this study found that students report family as their most influential source to encourage higher education, peers as their most influential source to discourage higher education, and numerous encouraging and discouraging messages regarding financial success both positively and negatively, as well as the influence media has on vocational goals and aspirations. This study is crucial to understanding the messages that inform higher education pursuit for Tennessee's rural and first-generation college students. This study has theoretical implications for VAS and memorable message research, as well as practical implications for the state of Tennessee's educational system.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As individuals mature throughout childhood into adolescence and adulthood, they gather vocational and career information subconsciously and consciously from their environment. This process of gathering vocational and career information prior to entering the workforce is called vocational anticipatory socialization (VAS; Jablin, 2011; Aley & Levine, 2020). VAS is a concentrated area of study within the realm of organizational socialization. Van Maanen (1975) describes organizational socialization as, “the process by which a person learns the values and norms and required behaviors which permit him to participate as a member of the organization,” (p. 65). Historically, organizational socialization scholars study the process by which individuals enter, assimilate into, and exit a group or organization. Though VAS is studied as an area within organizational socialization research, it takes place prior to organizational entry and has the ability to impact not only an individual’s workplace selections, but also their educational selections.

An individual’s VAS is established by a variety of sources, including family, peers and friends, part-time jobs and co-ops/internships, media, and educational institutions. These sources and their messages influence an individual throughout their maturation, thus establishing future decision-making processes and developing their self-concept (Jablin, 2011). While these sources are often studied independently, it is important to note that they do overlap, often impacting, affirming, or contradicting one another (Jablin, 2011). The memorable messages these sources communicate often stay with individuals throughout their lifetime and are recalled for guidance and emotional support when making decisions (Knapp, et al., 1981; Holladay, 2002). Researchers have studied memorable messages in relation to numerous topics, including organizational socialization (Barge & Schuler, 2004), family communication (Lucas &

Buzzanell, 2012), and education, with particular emphasis on higher education (Kranstuber et al., 2012; Nazione et al., 2011; Wang, 2012).

In recent years, memorable message research has begun examining the VAS messages received by rural students and first-generation college students (FGCS) regarding the decision to attend, or not attend, an institution of higher education. While this is not a particularly new area, it is important to note that researchers are currently examining rural students and FGCS independently from one another, rather than examining the overlap, or those students who identify as both rural students and FGCS. The purpose of this study is to gather information regarding VAS influences and their messages, both encouraging and discouraging, which inform a rural FGCS's decision to attend an institution of higher education in the state of Tennessee. This study will allow participants to identify their most influential VAS source to encourage and discourage their decision to pursue higher education, as well as allow participants to report the content of the VAS messages they received. This study will also allow participants to identify the factors, or reasons, for why they chose their particular higher education institution over others.

### **Higher Education in Tennessee**

#### ***TN Promise & tnAchieves***

Tennessee faces a unique set of challenges in regards to interest in higher education and VAS source messages. In the hopes promoting postsecondary education across the state of Tennessee, former governor, Bill Haslam, developed a higher education initiative in 2014 known as the Tennessee Promise (TN Promise). TN Promise aims to provide new high school graduates with the opportunity to enroll in a postsecondary associate or certificate programs without paying for tuition out-of-pocket (Carruthers, 2019). Prior to the passing of the TN Promise, tuition-free community college was available in Tennessee to high school seniors in Decatur, Henderson,

and Knox counties through two privately funded programs, the Ayers Foundation and Knox Achieves (Carruthers, 2019).

“Beginning in 1999, the Ayers Foundation provided grants of up to \$4,000 per student from rural Decatur and Henderson Counties. Then in 2008, Knox Achieves pledged free community college tuition to any interested high school senior in Knox County.

Participants were required to file for financial aid, meet with mentors, volunteer in their community, seamlessly enroll in college, and make satisfactory academic progress. In return, they received ‘last-dollar’ support covering any gap between community college tuition and other sources of financial aid,” (Carruthers, 2019, Para. 3).

By 2014, Knox Achieves had expanded to serve 27 counties under the name tnAchieves (Carruthers, 2019).

TN Promise adopted the tnAchieves model which led both the Ayers Foundation and tnAchieves to shift from being providers of tuition-free college, to partners of the TN Promise, facilitating the logistics of the new program and its expansion. Between 2014 and 2015, Tennessee’s first-time, full-time college student enrollment rose 11.4% and was driven by two-year colleges (Carruthers, 2019). At the same time TN Promise was launched, Tennessee Reconnect was introduced to pay technical college tuition for students 25 and older, and later expanded to also include nontraditional students in community college (Carruthers, 2019). Between 2014 and 2015, Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCAT) enrollment grew 14% among students under 25 and 12% among students 25 and older (Carruthers, 2019).

### ***Characteristics of Tennessee Students***

Despite this growth in 2014-2015, currently, the state of Tennessee is ranked 33rd in education across the United States, with only 32% of the state’s population being college-

educated (U.S. News & World Report, 2021). These rankings offer an opportunity to re-evaluate outreach initiatives from both tnAchieves and TN Promise, as well as in-state higher education institutions, with particular emphasis being placed on growing the state's number of college-educated individuals. The state's new focus is the 'Drive to 55', a targeted initiative aimed at equipping 55% of Tennesseans with a college degree or certificate by the year 2025 (Drive to 55 Alliance, 2018). While early TN Promise and tnAchieves enrollment data was promising and cause for optimism, long-term success is still unclear. Prior to his departure from office, Governor Haslam referred to the state's 28% community college completion rate as miserable and embarrassing (Carruthers, 2019). Gonzales and Ebert (2018) state, "...[Haslam's] administration quickly realized that giving people access to free education is not beneficial unless they're ready when they get there. He noted that 70 percent of students who get to community college needed remedial work," (Para. 9). Governor Haslam later reiterated that in order to receive better outcomes from the state's colleges, Tennesseans must be better prepared in K-12, prior to engaging with postsecondary institutions (Gonzalez & Ebert, 2018).

There are numerous demographic barriers to understand when considering preparing Tennessee's students for postsecondary education. Of the 95 counties within the state, 90 are currently aided by tnAchieves (tnAchieves, 2021). While this is a phenomenal start, of the 90 counties participating in the program, 74 are classified as rural, and 35 are rural communities at-risk of becoming economically distressed or are economically distressed (tnAchieves, 2021). The following conditions can result in economic distress classifications: low per capita income, low per capita taxable values, high unemployment, high under-employment, low weekly earning wages compared to the state average, low housing values compared to the state average, high percentages of the population receiving public assistance, high poverty levels compared to the

state average, and a lack of year-round stable employment opportunities (Law Insider, 2021). According to the most recent TN Promise student data, the household median Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) was \$61,271, with median Expected Family Contribution (EFC) being \$3,968 (Tennessee Promise, 2021, p. 16). In addition, 38.2% of TN Promise students are FGCS (Tennessee Promise, 2021, p. 16). When considering this data, it is important to understand that the state faces geographic, economic, and educational barriers to growing their percentage of college educated individuals. When facing the prospect of combatting these barriers to increase growth, it could prove highly beneficial for the state to encourage interest in higher education early, as well as inform students of the resources and opportunities available at the state's postsecondary institutions prior to enrollment.

### **Preview of this Project**

This project focuses on linking together the influence of VAS memorable messages and rural FGCS' interest in higher education. Chapter two provides a literature review of organizational socialization and VAS research, followed by an overview of memorable message research as it relates to VAS with specific emphasis placed on messages received by FGCS and rural students. In addition, the unique higher education experiences of FGCS and rural students as population categories will be examined. Methodology will be described in chapter three. Chapter four will discuss the study's findings and results. Chapter five discusses implications and future research. Chapter six ends with references.

The results of this study aim to provide postsecondary institutions in the state of Tennessee, as well as Tennessee education initiatives, with a specific understanding of the combined rural FGCS, and the sources, messages, and factors that inform their decision to pursue higher education. These results also have the potential to aid higher education institutions

in Tennessee in developing recruitment strategies to access and enroll these students, as well as inform outreach initiatives to address and overcome any discouraging VAS sources and messages these students are impacted by during their maturation process.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This project focuses on VAS, memorable messages, and the higher education interest of rural FGCS. This chapter will cover an overview of organizational socialization and VAS, as well as an overview of memorable messages and relevant research. This chapter will also provide a synopsis of FGCS and rural students. In addition, this chapter include a rationale for the project, as well as six research questions encompassing VAS, memorable messages, and higher education choice.

### **Organizational Socialization**

Socialization is extremely complex and fundamental to society and the human social experience. As children, we are “humanized” through socialization via social learning experiences and cultural development (Pescaru, 2018). Socialization can be considered the transmission of ideas, attitudes, values, and behaviors from one generation to the next (Pescaru, 2018). Socialization originates in the field of psychology; however, it has numerous applications to communication studies, specifically as it relates to organizations and groups. Organizational socialization is derived from organizational communication and organizational behavior, and explores the cognitive process that takes place as individuals join an organization. Organizational socialization was first defined by Schein (1968) as the, “process of ‘learning the ropes,’ the process of being indoctrinated and training, the process of being taught what is important in an organization,” (p. 2). This definition was later further developed by Van Maanen (1975) and states, “the process by which a person learns the values and norms and required behaviors which permit him to participate as a member of the organization” (p. 65). Organizational socialization is not a stagnant process, but rather a continuous process that can change and evolve over time

the longer an individual stays with an organization or proceeds through their working career (Porter et al., 1975).

Multiple models exist for examining socialization, all of which capture different dimensions of the socialization process. Jablin's (1982) model of organizational socialization, Moreland and Levine's (1982) Model of Group Socialization, and Lair's (2007) socialization model were selected for this project because each represents a different approach to the study of socialization. Jablin's (1982) model of organizational socialization was the first model in the field of organizational communication. Jablin's (1982) stage-based model laid the foundation for future scholars to adapt and grow, furthering his initial model development. Moreland and Levine's (1982) Model of Group Socialization further adapts Jablin's (1982) model and favors the small group, rather than the large organization. In addition, the Model of Group Socialization provides a stage-based timeline, or lifespan, approach to group and organizational membership. Lastly, Lair's (2007) socialization model moves away from the phase, or stage, approach taken by Jablin (1982) and Moreland and Levine (1982), instead favoring socialization through messages, relationships, and individual choices. Lair's (2007) socialization model favors socialization as a narrowing process from an individual's broad understanding of organizations and how they operate, to the individual's specific organizational selection.

### ***Jablin's Model of Organizational Socialization***

Utilizing Schein (1968), Van Maanen (1975), and Porter et al.'s (1975) prior research on assimilation and socialization, Jablin (1982) was the first researcher to develop a model of organizational socialization utilizing three basic stages, or phases: pre-arrival, or anticipatory socialization; encounter; and metamorphosis, or change of acquisition. Each one marks a clear and defined transition from one stage to the next in the organization socialization process. In the



pre-arrival, or anticipatory socialization phase, individuals form expectations about future employment and roles with an organization based on their background, education, previous work experience, and the organization's recruitment process (Jablin: 1982; 2001; 2011). During this time, individuals form ideas about what life at that particular organization will be like. After the anticipatory socialization phase, individuals enter the organization and begin the encounter phase of socialization. The encounter phase establishes a set day-to-day experience within the organization and reinforces the organization's policies and practices (Jablin, 1982; 2001; 2011). Jablin (1982) states, "Essentially, if the recruit's expectations resulting from anticipatory socialization conform with the reality of organizational life, the encounter stage is one of reaffirmation, reinforcement, and confirmation," (p. 257). If the recruit's expectations resulting from anticipatory socialization do not conform with the reality of organizational life, individuals can experience detachment from the organization during the encounter phase (Jablin, 1982).

In the final stage, metamorphosis, or change of acquisition, individuals attempt to become an accepted member of the organization by learning and assimilating to the attitudes and behaviors consistent with those of the organization (Jablin, 1982; 2001; 2011). Jablin's (2001) model was further adapted to add a fourth or final stage: disengagement or exit. This stage signifies when individuals leave the organization. According to Kramer (2010), "Exit is typically divided into two types: (1) voluntary exit when individuals initiate the change; or (2) involuntary exit when others initiate the change," (p. 9). While Jablin's (1982) early model suggested that stages come sequentially and individuals progress through them in a linear fashion, Jablin's (2001) later model emphasized that phases are fluid, with overlap occurring between the phases and individuals often fluctuating back and forth between the phases or repeating phases while at the same organization. It is important to include Jablin's (1982) model because it established the

foundation upon which other models later developed from. This model provides a base-level of knowledge and understanding about the history of socialization models.

### ***Moreland and Levine's Model of Group Socialization***

Moreland and Levine (1982) take a different approach to organizational socialization by focusing on small group socialization within the larger organization. They developed the Model of Group Socialization which allows scholars to understand the process by which socialization takes place within a workgroup or department, rather than with the organization as a whole. The model includes three basic psychological phases: evaluation, commitment, and role transition (Moreland & Levine, 1982). Evaluation is the efforts made by individuals and groups to assess each other's rewardingness, or ability to provide the group and the individual with what they need (Moreland & Levine, 1982). For example, every group has goals or objectives that the majority of group members want or need to accomplish. Because these goals are valuable to the group, they will evaluate the ability of the individual to contribute to the group's goal attainment (Moreland & Levine, 1982). Simultaneously, the individual will evaluate the ability of the group to contribute to their personal needs and satisfaction (Moreland & Levine, 1982). Commitment considers the individual and group's past, present, and future rewardingness assessment of their own relationships. For example, after both the group and the individual have evaluated one another, and that evaluation has proven to be positive for group goal attainment and individual satisfaction, both the individual and the group commit to meeting the needs of one another. The more rewarding the relationship becomes, the more committed the group and the individual become to one another (Moreland & Levine, 1982). Lastly, role transition occurs when commitment increases based on positive rewardingness evaluations, thus changing the individual's relationship with the group, and vice versa. For example, the individual becomes an

official member of the group, transitioning from outgroup member to ingroup member with the ability to assess rewardingness of new individuals with the group.

Similar to Jablin's (2001) adaptation of the model of organizational socialization, Moreland and Levine's (1982) model describes this process as often being cyclical, happening repeatedly over an individual's career and lifetime with a group. Levine and Moreland (1994) established five different stages of group socialization: investigation, socialization, maintenance, resocialization, and remembrance. These phases are marked by four different role transitions: entry, acceptance, divergence, and exit. When designing this model, Moreland and Levine (1982) sampled a variety of broad research literature on socialization, in categories such as small groups, political participation, social justice movements, voluntary associations, religious affiliation/disaffiliation and religious organizations, migration and assimilation, college choice, student socialization, socialization within total institutions, occupational choice, dyadic relationships, and much more. When compared to Jablin's (1982) socialization model above, the Model of Group Socialization is more specific and provides a cycle of a career or job lifespan within a group. In addition, it goes a step further by adding a phase and transition outlining an individual's exit from the group or organization as a critical element in the study of socialization prior to Jablin's (2001) adaptation of his prior model. It is important to include Moreland and Levine's (1982) Model of Group Socialization for the purposes of this study because this model further adapted Jablin's (1982) model to analyze the group within the organization, the impact individuals have on the group, and the exit stage of socialization. This model provides a link between Jablin's (1982) early model, and Lair's (2007) updated model.

### ***Lair's Model of Socialization***

Unlike Jablin's (1982) and Moreland and Levine's (1994) models, Lair's (2007) socialization model moves away from the stage, or phase, based approach. Instead, Lair (2007) emphasizes the individual as having specific career choices that are not linear or cyclical, rather than progressing through phases as a member of an organization or group. Lucas (2011) describes Lair's model by stating, "The model he proposes is one in which individuals move from broad-based socialization of work ideologies through narrowing socialization experiences (i.e., from work and vocational identity development to anticipatory socialization to organizational assimilation)" (p. 100). Particular emphasis is placed on an individual's pre-work experiences and the messages received from a variety of sources in an individual's life, or VAS. For Lair's (2007) model, socialization does not begin when an individual chooses an occupation, or organization, nor does it continue chronologically through stages that further socialize the individual. This model proposes that instead, individuals move from broad socialization of work and work ideologies to narrowing socialization experiences: from work and vocational identity establishment to anticipatory socialization to socialization. Lair's (2007) model establishes that individuals are socialized to particular ideologies and concepts for the value of organizations within their lives, then later the socialization process is narrowed to particular occupational choice and organization selection based on the individual, rather than the group or larger organization.

Together, these models provide an overview of the many aspects and layers of socialization from an organizational, group, and individual perspective. Jablin's (1982) model of organizational socialization favors the organization's impact on the individual. Moreland and Levine's (1982) Model of Group Socialization outlines the ways in which individuals and groups

are socialized within an organization simultaneously. Moreland and Levine (1982) further developed Jablin's (1982) original model to include cyclical phases and stages of socialization, rather than linear starting and stopping points favored by Jablin (1982). Lair's (2007) socialization model differs by depicting organizational socialization as a lifelong process specific to the individual; however, both Lair (2007) and Moreland and Levine (1982) emphasize the individual's role in socialization, rather than the simply the group's or the organization's role. Both Lair (2007) and Jablin (1982, 2001) discuss the importance of anticipatory socialization, or vocational anticipatory socialization, placing specific emphasis on the involvement of the family, peers, media, and educational institutions to the individual the socialization process. All three models provide important insight into the VAS process for higher education as individuals are socialized regarding interest in higher education by organizations and groups, such as educational institutions, and in addition, individuals are influenced to pursue or not pursue higher education bases on the messages received by VAS sources throughout their experience in elementary and high school.

### **Vocational Anticipatory Socialization**

As individuals mature from childhood to adulthood, they are subconsciously and consciously gathering vocational information from their environment, and comparing this information to their self-concept (Jablin, 2011). This time in which individuals gather information about careers prior to entering the workforce is called vocational anticipatory socialization (VAS; Aley & Levine, 2020, p. 352). Levine and Hoffner (2006) define VAS as the process of gaining knowledge about work that begins in early childhood and continues until entering the workplace full-time. As Jablin (2011) further develops this concept and notes:

“Socialization to work and preparation to occupy paid organizational positions commences in early childhood...[and] [a]s part of this conditioning, most of us have developed, prior to entering any particular organization, a set of expectations and beliefs concerning how people communicate in particular occupations and in formal and informal work settings” (p. 3).

Prior to entering the workforce, individuals understand the processes and rules that make up an organization. This understanding via VAS can happen through a variety of sources, including but not limited to family, peers and friends, educational institutions, part-time jobs, co-ops/internships, and media. In addition to the above sources, legal and societal factors, such as socioeconomic status, can play key roles in vocational socialization (Jablin, 2011).

These sources can overlap, impacting one another and thus, directly and indirectly impacting an individual’s vocational socialization (Jablin, 2011). Historically in VAS research, scholars have chosen to analyze these sources independently from one another, rather than examining how the overlap impacts an individual’s vocational socialization. Because of this isolation, there is not currently clear data to reflect all message sources of an individual’s VAS. This is important to note because VAS findings can be used in all educational and workplace settings. For example, findings can be used to adapt and develop training programs for adolescents prior to entering the workforce, provide recommendations on how to improve the socialization process to develop more effective workers, and correct any misinformation being communicated about the workforce and workplace expectations (Levine & Hoffner, 2006). The next sections highlight VAS sources: family, peers and friends, part-time jobs and co-ops/internships, media, and educational institutions.

## *Family*

From early childhood, parents and family members have a critical impact on an individual's VAS. Some scholars even argue that parents play the primary role in determining their children's vocational choices (Jablin, 2011; Aley & Levine, 2020; Levine & Hoffner, 2006). Children learn about work-related roles and responsibilities through household chores and tasks, as well as meaningful work-related messages relayed by working household members, such as parents and older siblings (Levine & Hoffner, 2006; Jablin, 2011). "Children observe their parent(s)' careers from a young age, learning about the importance of having a job and what it means to work" (Aley & Levine, 2020, p. 352). These observations are further reinforced through conversations between parent(s) and their children discussing the specifics of their roles, tasks, supervisors, and benefits. Children who are exposed to both positive and negative conversations about their parent(s)' work in detail develop a better understanding of workplace expectations and relationships, allowing them to consider a wide range of future careers.

These conversations often go beyond vocational task specifics and into concepts of fulfillment, dissatisfaction, satisfaction, opportunities, and belonging. Jahn and Myers (2015) argue that vocational socialization messages often include ideas of personal fulfillment, such as pursuing one's passion and finding a career one loves; however, they found that these messages are often lost or lacking for minority children and children of low socioeconomic status. These family structures often see working household members in occupations that do not offer the opportunity for personal fulfillment, satisfaction, or substantial benefits; instead, these family structures seek employment opportunities that sustain and provide for the family without regard to personal interest or fulfillment. Based on these messages, or lack thereof, children often adopt

their family members' vocational beliefs, values, and criteria when seeking their own employment opportunities. (Myers, et al., 2011).

### ***Peers and Friends***

Along with family members, peers and friends play a significant role in an individual's vocational socialization. Children and adolescents spend over half of their time any given week with their peers and friends, and this time often includes discussions of educational and vocational goals and aspirations (Jablin, 2011). Oftentimes, the socialization between individuals and their friends comes from participation in after school activities, such as sports teams or extracurricular clubs (Levine & Hoffner, 2006; Aley & Levine, 2020). These after school activities provide the opportunity for gaining experience in decision making and problem solving, as well as provide hands-on experience in working with diverse populations and teambuilding (Aley & Levine, 2020). In addition, these after school activities through peer relationships also allow for the understanding and acceptance of structured rules, mental concentration and attention to detail, and respect for authority in the form of coaches and club leaders.

Peers and friends can also inform individuals about which vocations are socially acceptable or desirable, and which are not through messages of approval and disapproval (Jablin, 2011; Levine & Hoffner, 2006; Aley & Levine, 2020). These messages of approval and disapproval allow individuals to assess their occupational interests and adjust accordingly to what their friends and peers are interested in. While little research has been conducted about the actual conversations regarding work and organizational information shared between children and adolescents, we do know that friends and peers prefer to be treated in ways that are person-centered and allow for their opinions, motivations, and goals to be seen and appreciated.



Therefore, when conflict occurs, peers and friends rarely seek higher authority to solve problems, instead doing so amongst themselves, and thus learning about emotion and expression regulation, negotiating, and maintaining relationships - all of which are extremely important to long term VAS (Jablin, 2011).

### ***Part-time Jobs and Co-ops/Internships***

Part-time jobs and co-ops/internships allow adolescent individuals to receive vocational socialization through actual employment and hands-on experience. However, the part-time jobs often held by adolescents (e.g., retail, food service, manual labor) require relatively little technical skills or training, but do provide the opportunity for understanding basic workplace relationships and responsibilities (Levine & Hoffner, 2006). Internships provide applicable career training and insight, allowing adolescents to gain skills and network within their future career and organizational setting (Aley & Levine, 2020). Levine and Hoffner (2006) state, "...high-quality employment (e.g., a job with the opportunity for skill development) can foster a sense of responsibility, motivation to do good work, and feelings of accomplishment" (p. 650). Unfortunately, these high-quality employment opportunities oftentimes are not readily accessible to students below the postsecondary education level.

According to Jablin (2011), about 80% of the high school age individuals in the United States are employed in part-time jobs prior to graduation. Currently, minimal research has explored how these part-time jobs impact their occupational communication expectations, as well as, what exactly is learned about work communication through these experiences.

Greenberger et al. (1982) found that high school, part-time workers do not have meaningful communication relationships with others in their workplace, specifically their supervisors, and that they often work unsupervised entirely with little opportunity for developing relationships

and communication skills that are beneficial for future employment opportunities. While some part-time jobs provide helpful and applicable VAS, more often these employment opportunities lack beneficial VAS because they do not depict true workplace relationships and experiences.

### *Media*

Though not providing direct vocational messaging to individuals like those sources mentioned above, media exposes individuals to a wide range of vocations and careers that they otherwise may have never been exposed to. Individuals may seek out and gravitate towards those vocations and careers held by their significant media figures from movies, television, and social media (Bandura, 2001). VAS through television and film can occasionally provide misinformation due to the dramatization of occupational roles in media productions.

Occupational roles in television and film often promote misleading information in regards to workplace expectations, supervisor/subordinate relationships, technical skill requirements and qualifications, and career availability (Aley & Levine, 2020; Levine & Hoffner, 2006). In addition, Myers et al. (2011) found television and film productions often uphold traditional sex stereotypes, reinforcing ideas of sex-based career choices, such as females are teachers, males are scientists. Television and film productions also tend to over represent supervisor and white-collar roles, while underrepresenting subordinate and blue-collar roles, thus glamorizing certain roles while making others seem undesirable, or lesser than (Jablin, 2011).

In addition to television and film media, print media has also been found to provide vocational socialization misinformation in the same or similar ways. Children's books can contain warped and outdated occupational information that reinforces occupational, racial, and sex stereotypes (Ingersoll & Adams, 1992). Furthermore, magazines specifically marketed to one sex or the other can reinforce sex-based occupational stereotypes by highlighting stories from

individuals that favor traditionally popular occupational roles held by that particular sex (Pierce, 1993). The consistency and repetitiveness of the way vocational socialization is depicted across all media platforms can reinforce a child or adolescent's lifetime career goals and choices.

However, it is important to note that the impact of media portrayals listed may have adapted in recent years due to the development of new technologies and media.

### ***Educational Institutions***

Alongside family and peers, educational institutions play a vital role in the vocational socialization of individuals. Jablin (2011) highlights six key ways in which educational institutions are key sources of vocational socialization:

1. Educational institutions are explicitly mandated to socialize individuals
2. Pre-school or primary school is typically the first socializing institution in a child's life that depicts labor classifications and career roles
3. Educational institutions provide the transitional space between adolescence and the full-time work that accompanies adulthood
4. School provides opportunities to develop career goals based on comprehension of subjects and mastery of skills
5. School is typically the first place where children engage in organized activity, both inside and outside the classroom; and
6. Individuals develop study habits and learning strategies in school that will later be applied to their workplace roles and responsibilities.

Beginning in daycare, or pre-k, children learn how to develop relationships with their peers through consistent, learned communication strategies. In addition, children also develop an understanding for organization rules, roles, and behavioral expectations that later apply beyond

the primary school setting. The interactions that take place between students, teachers, principals and staff allow students to understand how communication works in different occupational and organizational settings.

Once adolescents reach high school, they begin learning about specific occupations through specialized or elective classes designed to allow individuals to begin narrowing their interests and developing required skills (Jablin, 2011). High school guidance and career counselors also provide advice and mentorship in basic career preparation, especially for those students choosing to pursue higher education (Jahn & Myers, 2015). Students at this level learn about the basics of work, such as working in teams and collaborating, and the importance of being responsible for their own work independently and self-sufficiently (Jahn & Myers, 2015). Students at this level develop an understanding that desirable jobs require a good education foundation (Jahn & Myers, 2015).

### **Memorable Messages within Vocational Anticipatory Socialization**

The concept of VAS would be impossible to study without the consideration of memorable messages which shape an individual's VAS. Memorable messages are those intentionally communicated messages that individuals remember as having a profound impact on their lives and development over long periods of time (Knapp, et al., 1981). Scholars have studied memorable messages in relation to numerous topics, including organizational socialization (Barge & Schuler, 2004), family communication (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012), and education (Kranstuber et al., 2012; Nazione et al., 2011; Wang, 2012). Knapp et al. (1981) created four initial categories for memorable messages: (1) message structure; (2) message form and organization; (3) message content; and (4) circumstances surrounding the execution and reception of the message. Furthermore, there are five consistent attributes used to describe

memorable messages from a research perspective: (1) messages are typically brief; (2) messages are remembered for long periods of time, specifically if they are applicable to the individual's particular circumstances; (3) the recipient of the message perceives themselves to be the sole message target; (4) messages have a simple structure; and (5) recipients are requested to participate in forming the message (Knapp, et al., 1981; Cooke-Jackson & Rubinsky, 2018). Later memorable message research found that the message itself does not have to be recalled word-for-word to be defined as memorable, but rather, as long as the content is remembered and satisfies the receivers social and emotional development needs, it is considered memorable (Knapp, et al., 1981; Holladay, 2002).

While memorable message literature exists in a variety of topics within the field of communication, a significant portion of memorable message research has been conducted through the lens of higher education. Memorable messages have been used to study how students navigate college life, how parents impact college student success, and how memorable messages from mentors impact the success of first-generation college students (Cooke-Jackson & Rubinsky, 2018). Nazione et al.'s (2011) study found that academic-related memorable messages from family members and educational instructors were mostly positive, and related to ideas of perseverance, hard work, and belief in one's self. Kranstuber et al. (2012) furthered Nazione et al.'s (2011) research through their discovery of positively and negatively valenced memorable messages from parents regarding higher education, finding themes such as 'work hard play hard' and 'do as I say not as I did'. Wang's (2012) study focused specifically on the memorable messages from educational mentors that impact first generation college students. This research had mostly positive findings, with themes centered around ideas of academic success, potential, and support; however, there were also findings of family themes centered around ideas of

reliance on familial units and recognizing the importance of family. Though the themes for these three studies have mostly positive connotations, they can often have negative connotations when analyzing memorable messages regarding higher education for first generation college students.

First generation college students and rural students face a particularly unique set of challenges when it comes to memorable messages regarding higher education. Oftentimes, students of blue-collar families are limited by social reproduction. Social reproduction can be defined as holding the same occupation or vocation as one's parent(s), or holding a position with the same socioeconomic status as one's parent(s) (Lucas, 2011). This concept is especially prevalent in blue collar fields, such as firefighting, factory work, and agriculture (Myers, 2005; Gibson & Papa, 2000; Pitts et al., 2009). Social reproduction is also present in white collar fields, such as law, medicine, and politics, thus continuing generational social mobility, or the upward and downward movement of individuals through the social status system, and success through occupations that require higher education (Laband & Lentz, 1985; Perrucci & Wysong, 2003). Lucas (2011) states, "...first-generation college students (presumably from working-class families) have a more difficult time fulfilling the educational requirements largely necessary for success in white-collar professions and, consequently, are hindered from achieving [upward] social mobility" (p. 97).

Social reproduction is perpetuated via memorable messages and VAS practices of working-class families that differ from middle- and upper-class families. Working-class parents tend to reiterate the values and occupational power structures of their workplaces within their homes through messages regarding punching time cards, deferring to upper level management for decision making, and following instructions with little to no creative freedom or autonomy (Kohn, 1969). This results in individuals from blue collar families valuing conformity, authority,

and status quo in occupations, rather than valuing critical thinking skills or autonomy within occupations (Lucas, 2011). While the memorable messages individuals receive from their parents have the ability to perpetuate social reproduction, they also have the ability to mitigate social reproduction. Simpson's (1962) study found that students whose parents urge them to seek higher education and white-collar fields are more likely to, versus those students whose parents do not. Currently, memorable message research regarding first generation and rural students considering higher education centers on those messages transmitted by parents, with very little research regarding memorable messages transmitted by educators and educational institutions. This provides an opportunity for additional consideration and future exploration.

### **Higher Education Experiences**

Educational institutions have the potential to impact an individual's VAS and subsequent decision to pursue, or not pursue, a postsecondary education. Research examining the impact educational institutions have on an individual's VAS is currently focused on early childhood education experiences, with little discussion surrounding secondary or postsecondary education experiences. This concept remains to be fully explored, specifically when considering the impact memorable messages regarding VAS have on FGCS and rural students' interest in, and pursuit of, higher education. For many students pursuing white collar occupations, higher education institutions are often the last step before transitioning into the workplace, and there, students are more likely to use their time developing desires for working in certain types of companies and with particular types of managers (Omilion-Hodges, et al., 2019). These institutions are also the place where mentorships are developed through relationships with professors, advisors, and student affairs professionals. These mentorships provide social support and guidance, as well as future employment connections through mutual networks. As mentioned previously, first

generation and rural students face additional barriers when considering higher education. These challenges can be difficult to overcome, especially if support for higher education and upward mobility are not present within the family unit.

### ***First Generation College Students and Higher Education***

Educators play a role of particular importance in VAS for first generation college students (FGCS). FGCS are defined as college students whose parents did not attend college or attain a bachelor's degree (Ma, et al., 2021). The overwhelming majority of these students are from marginalized ethnic or racial groups, and/or have low socioeconomic status (Ma, et al., 2021; Brigandi, et al., 2020). Fifty-six percent of all undergraduate college students in the United States are FGCS (RTI International, 2019). When FGCS do enroll in postsecondary educational institutions, they are more likely to leave college after their first year (Pratt, et al., 2017). While in high school, prospective FGCS are more likely to have lower reading and math skills which results in being overlooked for gifted education programs and Advanced Placement (AP) classes, as well as ACT and SAT preparation courses and exams (Brigandi, et al., 2020). Prior to becoming a FGCS, prospective FGCS identified the following issues as perceived barriers to higher education: family, finances, racial/ethnic discrimination, lack of college-educated role models, and lack of preparation and/or desire, while their non-FGCS peers only identified finances and school stress as perceived barriers to higher education (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). These high achieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds are twice as likely to drop out of high school, more likely to struggle or fall behind academically, and less likely to attend, much less graduate from, college (Brigandi, et al., 2020). While these students often have strong desires to succeed and excel, they lack firsthand knowledge of the careers they aspire to and how to pursue them without parents and mentors who can guide them accordingly.



Secondary and postsecondary educational institutions have the ability to mentor and guide prospective and current FGCS by providing social and informational support and connectedness to the educational community. Historically, FGCS report having less significant support from family, specifically emotional, informational, and financial support, compared to their non-FGCS peers (Ma, et al., 2021). While some FGCS report having significant emotional support from family in regards to academic pursuits, they simultaneously report having less significant informational support in navigating college and career opportunities (Ma, et al., 2021). Research has found that high achieving FGCS had emotionally supportive K-12 educators, exposure to advanced curriculum, and a community of like-minded, high achieving peers (Hérbert, 2018). Secondary and postsecondary educational institutions who can identify these high achieving students early have a greater chance of ensuring their pursuit of higher education and long-term success at their chosen institution.

### ***Rural Students and Higher Education***

Similar to FGCS, educators also play a particular role of importance for rural students. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Census Bureau define rural areas as regions with fewer than 50,000 people, located several miles from urbanized areas and clusters (Lopez & Schwartz, 2019). According to Census Bureau data in 2010, approximately 60 million Americans live in rural areas, making up roughly 20% of the United States population (Manly, et al., 2020). Historically, rural students attend postsecondary institutions less often than their non-rural peers, and they are less likely to attend highly selective institutions, or institutions with graduate level degree programs (Manly, et al., 2020). In addition, these students are considerably more likely to delay college attendance, and are more likely to withdraw from college after the first year (Manly, et al., 2020). Due to physical isolation, and a lack of resources, rural students

are oftentimes unable to travel to visit or attend the four-year institutions within, or outside of, their state (Lopez & Schwartz, 2019). Instead, they are limited to those institutions that are within their own geographic region, typically technical or two-year institutions (Paterson, 2020).

In addition to the geographic barriers to higher education mentioned above, socioeconomic barriers also limit rural students' ability to access postsecondary education. Rural families are facing a well-documented decrease in income levels that stems from unemployment and underemployment in rural communities (Paterson, 2020). Four-year institutions often come with a large price tag, especially when considering not only tuition and fees, but also room and board. According to Paterson (2020), colleges are more likely to recruit in those regions where family income exceeds \$100,000, and forgo recruitment efforts in regions where family income is \$70,000 or lower, resulting in rural communities being overlooked by the recruitment efforts of four-year institutions. Similarly, colleges historically concentrate disproportionately on recruiting individuals from private schools, which are more commonly located in urban or suburban areas rather than rural areas, thus ensuring that recruitment efforts stay within those regions where enrollment costs can be covered independently from grants, loans, and scholarships (Paterson, 2020). Lopez and Schwartz (2019) state, "If America's high-graduation-rate colleges and universities provide greater access and opportunity for talented low-income rural students, they have the potential not only to propel these students' social mobility, but to provide benefits to their communities as well," (Para. 4). Education institutions have the opportunity to provide equitable access to recruitment efforts and informational resources in regards to financial aid and scholarships.

Rural students also often lack social and informational support from their families and communities about higher education. "Rural students are also less likely than their urban and

suburban peers to have access to the resources needed to apply to and be successful in college, like high-speed broadband internet, academically rigorous courses, extracurricular opportunities, and fully staffed high school counseling offices,” (Lopez & Schwartz, 2019, Para 8). This lack of social and informational support can hinder rural students’ ability to access higher education opportunities in the same way as their urban and suburban peers. Similarly, community socialization greatly impacts whether or not a rural student will attend a four-year institution. Community socialization refers to the established norms, roles, and expectations between younger and older community members (Paterson, 2020). Paterson (2020) found that rural students are less likely to want to leave their communities, and may face pressures from home and their families, specifically for those students who provide the family with financial assistance. Rural students can also have anxiety about navigating a large campus in an urban environment, especially when the communities they grew up in are small, centralized, and interconnected with little access to outside regions (Paterson, 2020). Parents and families of rural students also face concerns surrounding whether or not they will be able to relate to their student after they receive a college education, or whether or not they will return home after being exposed to a different culture and community (Paterson, 2020). These concerns can be mitigated through frequent communication with college and career counselors, as well as the colleges themselves that are of interest to the student (Paterson, 2020). However, Lopez and Schwartz (2019) state, “...talented low- and moderate-income rural students may have limited awareness of their college options. Recruiting pipelines are often based on existing relationships with high schools or community-based organizations that are primarily located in urban and suburban areas...” (Para, 7). Education institutions at both the secondary and postsecondary level have the responsibility to educate, and advocate for, rural students and families about college readiness,

advanced placement courses and standardized testing, college applications, and higher education opportunities, thus dispelling anxiety and fear, and instead promoting opportunities.

### **Rationale**

Beginning in early childhood and continuing through adolescence, individuals are consciously and subconsciously gathering information for particular vocations and developing vocational choices based on messages received from sources, such as family, peers and friends, co-ops/internships and part time jobs, media, and educational institutions (Jablin, 2011). These sources can overlap and influence one another, thus directly and indirectly impacting an individual's VAS (Jablin, 2011). VAS as an area of study was popularized by Jablin (1982) and has been the feature of numerous studies within socialization research. Historically, scholars have elected to study VAS sources independently from one another, rather than examining the overlap and how it impacts an individual. This is an important note because VAS findings have applied impact on a wide variety of educational and workplace settings. For example, findings can be used to adapt and develop training programs for adolescents prior to entering the workforce, provide recommendations on how to improve the socialization process to develop more effective workers, and correct any misinformation being communicated about the workforce and workplace expectations (Levine & Hoffner, 2006).

Despite this relevance and practical application, scholars have only recently begun examining VAS sources and memorable messages received by rural students and FGCS regarding the decision to attend, or not attend, an institution of higher education. It is important to note that researchers are currently examining rural students and FGCS independently from one another, rather than examining the overlap, or those students who identify as both rural students and FGCS. There is currently no clear data to reflect the impact memorable messages and VAS

sources have on a rural FGCS' decision to pursue higher education. Previous studies placed a multitude of emphasis on the importance of family and peer source messages in the decision to pursue higher education, but neglected to emphasize the messages of educators and educational institutions in the decision to pursue higher education. In addition, prior research has also established that previous generations, despite being academically capable, perceived financial concerns and school stress as barriers to their interest in higher education, and special populations perceived additional barriers based on their cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). These barriers were communicated and reinforced through influential sources involved in their decision-making process. As a new generation of students prepares to enter the workforce, it is important to understand their interests to pursue or not pursue higher education, and the sources and their messages that are most influential in making that decision.

This study is modeled after work by Powers and Myers (2017) who analyzed VAS and college students' reports of encouraging and discouraging source messages as they pertain to major selection and subsequent career choice. Powers and Myers (2017) established three basic research questions to gather information from students regarding specific interest, and subsequent major selections, made by college students based on encouraging and discouraging messages from influential sources. These research questions have been replicated and adapted to gather information regarding the most influential source to encourage or discourage interest in higher education for this generation of students, as well as establish which messages from those sources are most encouraging or discouraging regarding higher education. Therefore, the following questions are posed:

RQ1: Who do students report as the most influential person to encourage their interest in higher education?

RQ2: What VAS messages did the perceived most influential person convey that students found encouraging?

RQ3: Who do students report as the most influential person to discourage their interest in higher education?

RQ4: What VAS messages did the perceived most influential person convey that students found discouraging?

Rural students and FGCS are populations often neglected by higher education institutions. Rural students are individuals who originate from regions with fewer than 50,000 people, located several miles from urbanized areas and clusters (Lopez & Schwartz, 2019). FGCS are college students whose parents/guardians did not attend college or attain a bachelor's degree (Ma, et al., 2021). While these special populations of students are often analyzed independently, it is important to note that they often overlap, with individuals identifying as both a rural student and a FGCS; therefore, it is necessary to research these populations independently as well as the overlap of rural FGCS. Both rural students and FGCS alike often lack social, financial, and informational support from their families and communities about higher education (Paterson, 2020; Ma, et al., 2021). Both populations who report having emotional support from family and community in regards to academic pursuits simultaneously report lacking informational support in academic pursuits, thus leaving them uninformed and unprepared when they elect to attend an institution of higher education (Ma, et al., 2021; Paterson, 2020).

Prior studies have established that for both rural students and FGCS alike, frequent communication with colleges, or individuals employed by or involved with higher education

institutions, can mitigate discouraging messages received from other VAS sources regarding higher education, thus providing encouraging messages and increasing the likelihood that an individual will pursue higher education (Paterson, 2020; Hérbert, 2018). By recognizing these populations as ones that are often neglected by higher education institutions, researchers can gather information regarding the most influential source to encourage or discourage interest in higher education for these groups, as well as establish which messages from those sources are most encouraging or discouraging regarding higher education. In addition, it is also important that researchers gather information regarding which factors are most significant regarding higher education institution choice for those rural students and FGCS that pursue higher education. The results of this study will provide higher education institutions with an understanding of these students, and the sources, messages, and factors that inform their decision to pursue higher education. These results have the potential to aid higher education institutions in developing recruitment strategies to access and enroll these students, as well as inform community outreach programs to address and overcome discouraging sources and messages these students receive during the VAS process. Therefore, these research questions have been adapted from Powers and Myers (2017) to specifically target rural students, FGCS, and rural FGCS:

RQ5: Do students differ in (a) who they perceive as the most influential in encouraging their interest in higher education, (b) who they perceive as the most influential in discouraging their interest in higher education, and (c) the types of VAS messages conveyed by those persons?

RQ6: Do students differ in what factors they report as being the most influential in their choice of higher education institution?

Rural students and FGCS are oftentimes members of familial units with a history of blue-collar work. Prior memorable message studies have established that students of blue-collar families are frequently limited by social reproduction. Social reproduction can be defined as holding the same occupation or vocation as one's parent(s), or holding a position with the same socioeconomic status as one's parent(s) (Lucas, 2011). This concept is especially prevalent in blue collar fields, such as firefighting, factory work, and agriculture (Myers, 2005; Gibson & Papa, 2000; Pitts et al., 2009). Similarly, social reproduction can also be present in white collar fields with an emphasis on legacy, such as law, medicine, and politics, thus continuing generational social mobility, or the upward and downward movement of individuals through the social status system, and success through occupations that require higher education (Laband & Lentz, 1985; Perrucci & Wysong, 2003). These studies have established that social reproduction can impact the decision to attend or not attend an institution of higher education. However, for those students who choose to attend an institution of higher education, there is a gap in literature regarding the reasoning and motivation behind major choice, and subsequent career choice. Therefore, the following question is posed:

RQ7: What reasons do students report for selecting their major or field of interest?



## CHAPTER 3: METHOD

### Participants

This study had a sample of 331 ( $n = 331$ ) participants of college-age. Within this sample of participants, 237 (71.6%) were enrolled at a 2-year institution, 67 (20.2%) were enrolled at a 4-year institution, 20 (6%) were enrolled at a trade school, and 7 (2.1%) were enrolled at an unnamed institution type. Participants included 78 (23.6%) males, 245 (74%) females, and 8 (2.4%) individuals who identify as neither male or female, or both male and female. The mean participant age was 18.68, with a minimum age of 18, a maximum age of 21, and a standard deviation of .71. Participants were asked to report whether or not they were FGCS. 124 (27.5%) participants identified as a FGCS, while 186 (56.2%) participants did not identify as a FGCS. Participants were also asked to self-report their ethnicity with the most frequently reported ethnicity being white at 241 (72.8%) responses. Table 1 outlines the full participant self-reported ethnicity demographics; however, it is important to note that though very different, race and ethnicity were terms used interchangeably in this study. Future researchers should prioritize distinguishing between the two in order to gather more accurate data.

In addition, participants were asked to report their household income range from a pre-set selection within the survey. The most frequently reported household income was \$32,048 or less (38.7%; see Table 2). Participants were also asked to identify their county of residence and whether their county of residence was classified as rural ( $n = 84$  or 25.4%), suburban ( $n = 166$  or 50.2%), or urban ( $n = 60$  or 18.1%). The most frequently reported county of residence was Knox County with 35 (10.6%) responses. Table 3 outlines the participant county of residence demographics. Lastly, participants were asked to self-report their major, or intended area of

study, at their higher education institution. The most frequently reported major was business with 38 (11.5%) responses. Table 4 outlines the participant major demographics.

These participants were gathered through network and purposive sampling. Network sampling, also known as snowball sampling or multiplicity sampling, is a way of gathering participants from those populations where little information is available on the size and magnitude of the population (Lavrakas, 2008). In addition, network sampling participants are gathered by informants who are generally friends, family, relatives, or associates (Lavrakas, 2008). This study used network sampling because it is analyzing rare populations with unknown size and magnitude, and participants were gathered by an informant who is a research partner of the author. Purposive sampling is the deliberate seeking out of participants with particular characteristics, according to the needs of the developing analysis and emerging theory (Lewis-Black et al., 2004). This study used purposive sampling because it is analyzing participants that are specifically located in Tennessee and are individuals affiliated with tnAchieves.

Roughly 15,000 students are currently enrolled in the tnAchieves listserv, which gave access to a wide variety of students from various backgrounds across the state of Tennessee. Each participant was currently enrolled in a higher education institution that participates in the TN Promise through tnAchieves. Participants were contacted via the tnAchieves email listserv, courtesy of Graham Thomas. Thomas is the Director of Community Partnerships at tnAchieves, is a partner of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville's School of Communication Studies, and has collaborated with the program's researchers on prior studies. Participation was voluntary; however, each student who completes the survey had the option of being entered to win a \$10 retail gift card upon completion. Five students were randomly selected to receive one retail gift

card each, amounting to \$10 dollars per retail gift card for a total of \$50 dollars. Students were randomly selected and gift cards were distributed following the closure of the study survey.

**Table 1***Ethnicity of Study Participants*

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
White	241	72.8%
Black	40	12.1%
Asian	10	3%
Hispanic	7	2.1%
Native & White	5	1.5%
Native	3	.9%
Unnamed	3	.9%
Asian, Black, White	2	.6%
Asian & White	2	.6%
Human	2	.6%
Mestizo	2	.6%
Native, White, Unnamed	2	.6%
All but Unnamed	1	.3%
Asian & Black	1	.3%
Black & White	1	.3%
Haitian	1	.3%
Mixed	1	.3%
Native, Black, Unnamed	1	.3%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific	1	.3%
Native Hawaiian & White	1	.3%

**Table 2***Household Income of Participants and Families*

<b>Income</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
\$32,048 or less	128	38.7%
\$53,414 - \$106,827	102	30.8%
\$32,049 - \$53,413	65	19.6%
\$106,828 - \$373,894	29	8.8%
\$373,985 or more	2	.6%

**Table 3***Participant County of Residence*

<b>County</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Anderson	4	1.2%
Bedford	5	1.5%
Blount	13	3.9%
Bradley	5	1.5%
Campbell	2	.6%
Carroll	1	.3%
Carter	1	.3%
Cheatham	1	.3%
Claiborne	3	.9%
Clay	1	.3%
Cocke	3	.9%
Coffee	3	.9%
Crockett	2	.6%
Cumberland	4	1.2%
Davidson	16	4.8%
Dickson	3	.9%
Dyer	1	.3%
Fentress	2	.6%
Giles	5	1.5%
Grainger	1	.3%
Greene	9	2.7%
Hamblen	4	1.2%
Hamilton	9	2.7%
Hancock	1	.3%
Hardin	2	.6%
Hawkins	2	.6%
Hickman	1	.3%
Humphreys	1	.3%
Jackson	2	.6%
Jefferson	4	1.2%
Knox	35	10.6%
Lake	1	.3%
Lauderdale	1	.3%
Lewis	2	.6%
Lincoln	1	.3%
Loudon	5	1.5%
McMinn	2	.6%
McNairy	2	.6%
Madison	3	.9%
Marshall	1	.3%
Maury	3	.9%

**Table 3 continued**

Monroe	1	.3%
Montgomery	2	.6%
Moore	1	.3%
Obion	2	.6%
Pickett	1	.3%
Polk	2	.6%
Putnam	3	.9%
Rhea	2	.6%
Roane	3	.9%
Robertson	3	.9%
Rutherford	15	4.5%
Scott	3	.9%
Sequatchie	1	.3%
Sevier	9	2.7%
Shelby	29	8.8%
Smith	1	.3%
Sullivan	7	2.1%
Sumner	17	5.1%
Tipton	4	1.2%
Union	2	.6%
Warren	2	.6%
Washington	4	1.2%
Wayne	4	1.2%
Williamson	8	2.4%
Wilson	13	3.9%

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**Table 4***Intended Majors of Participants*

<b>Major</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Business	38	11.5%
Nursing	33	10%
Education	30	9.1%
Health Care	30	9.1%
Social Sciences	27	8.2%
General Science	23	6.9%
Undecided/General Studies	18	5.4%
Computer Science & Technology	14	4.2%
Agriculture	13	3.9%
Criminal Justice	13	3.9%
Engineering	12	3.6%
Art	9	2.7%
Diesel & Automotive	9	2.7%
Physical Therapy	9	2.7%
Accounting	7	2.1%
Machining & Welding	6	1.8%
History	6	1.8%
English	5	1.5%
Dental Hygiene	4	1.2%
Cosmetology & Aesthetics	4	1.2%
HVAC	4	1.2%
Mathematics	3	.9%
Foreign Language	3	.9%
Legal Studies	2	.6%
Speech Pathology	2	.6%
Helicoptering	2	.6%
Theatre	1	.3%
Public Safety	1	.3%
Sports & Leisure	1	.3%
Architecture & Design	1	.3%



## Procedure

Each participant was asked to complete a set of basic demographic questions to establish background information regarding the participants' age, sex, ethnicity, enrollment institution type, background, county type, and county of residence (see survey in Appendix). Following the demographic questions, participants were prompted to answer questions regarding VAS and memorable messages. Participants were asked whether or not someone encouraged their interest in higher education. Then, participants identified via rank order which source category was most influential in encouraging their interest in higher education. After identifying which source category was most influential in encouraging their interest in higher education, participants were asked to recall via short answer what messages they specifically received from their most influential sources that encouraged their interest in higher education. Following this short answer question, participants were asked whether or not someone discouraged their interest in higher education. Then, participants were asked to identify via rank order which source category was most influential in discouraging their interest in higher education. After identifying which source category was most influential in discouraging their interest in higher education, participants were asked to recall via short answer what messages they specifically received from their most influential sources that discouraged their interest in higher education.

Following these VAS and memorable messages questions, participants were asked to answer a series of questions regarding their reasoning for choosing to pursue higher education. Participants were asked to what extent they agree or disagree with seven questions regarding their attitude toward their specific institution. Participants were also asked to what extent they agree or disagree with five questions regarding the life planning influences on their higher education attendance. In addition, participants were asked to what extent they agree or disagree

with five questions regarding others' influence on their higher education attendance. Following this, participants were asked to what extent they agree or disagree with five questions regarding the independence/recreational reasons for their higher education attendance. Lastly, participants were asked to what extent they agree or disagree with three questions regarding the family tradition of attendance at their higher education institution.

## **Measures**

### ***Vocational Anticipatory Socialization Messages and Sources***

The researcher created the demographic questions to establish background information about individual participants for the study. For example, questions like, "What is your age?" and "With which sex do you identify?" In addition, the researcher adapted the four VAS questions from Powers and Myers' (2017) study. The first and third VAS questions in this study follow Powers and Myers (2017) with slight wording alterations to fit this particular study. For example, Powers and Myers (2017) ask, "Think about conversations with others that may have ENCOURAGED you to enter into (or pursue) a particular career. Please think of the most influential person who comes to mind. Who was that person?" (p. 413). For Powers and Myers (2017), participants were provided answer options from which to choose for mother, father, other family member, teacher/professor, friend, work supervisor, and other (with space for the respondent to type in their answer; p. 413). This study asks, "Which category do you perceive as the most influential in encouraging your interest in higher education?" Then, provides answer options from which to rank in order of importance, like: family, peer/friends, educational institutions, etc.

The second and fourth VAS questions in this study were adapted from Powers and Myers (2017). For example, Powers and Myers (2017) state, "Immediately following each of the

questions measuring students' perceived most influential source of encouraging and discouraging VAS messages, respondents were asked 'What did that person say?' They responded in a text box with unlimited space," (p. 413). Powers and Myers (2017) then categorized responses based on the three message type categories. This study asks, "Think back to the previous response where you indicated which category was most influential in encouraging your interest in higher education. What messages did your most influential category communicate, or what things did they say, to encourage your interest in higher education?" Please see Analysis below for information regarding coding for this study. Reliability will be checked for all questions adapted from Powers and Myers (2017) since reliability was not directly reported in their study.

### ***College Influence Choice Scale (CICS)***

Lastly, the higher education choice questions in this study were adapted from Martin and Dixon's (1991) College Influence Choice Scale (CICS). For example, Martin and Dixon (1991) state,

"The CICS assumes students are influenced by a variety of factors regarding the decision to attend college. Accordingly, the scale has a full-scale and five factor analysis derived subscales: (a) attitudes toward the specified institution, (b) life-planning influences, (c) influence of others, (d) independence-recreational reasons, (e) family tradition of attendance at the specified institution" (p. 255).

The CICS has an overall reliability of .73, and the alpha reliability for the five subscales range from .66 to .79 (Martin & Dixon, 1991). Responses were originally measured using a 6-point Likert scale, with 6 being strongly agree and 1 being strongly disagree. For this study, the Likert scale has been modified to a 5-point Likert scale with 5 being strongly agree and 1 being strongly disagree. Participants respond according to which best describes their feelings about the

statement. Factor one addresses attitudes toward the specified institution: for example, “If I could go to school anywhere, I would still go to my college.” Factor two addresses life planning influence on attendance: for example, “I decided to go to college to prove to myself that I was smart enough to pass.” Factor three addresses others’ influence on attendance: for example, “My parents want me to go to college.” Factor four addresses independence/recreational activities: for example, “I am attending college to get away from my hometown.” Lastly, factor five addresses family tradition of attendance at the specified institution: for example, “Other members of my immediate family attend or have attended my college.”

A reliability test was conducted in SPSS to verify the reported reliability of the CICS. This reliability test found that the CICS was unreliable, with a Cronbach’s Alpha of .66. Additional reliability testing was then conducted for each factor within CICS. Attitudes toward the specified institution was found to have a Cronbach’s Alpha of .70. Life-planning influences was found to have a Cronbach’s Alpha of .39. Influence of others was found to have a Cronbach’s Alpha of .37. Independence-recreational reasons was found to have a Cronbach’s Alpha of .78. Family tradition of attendance was found to have a Cronbach’s Alpha of .62. Therefore, only the subscales for attitudes toward the specified institution and independence-recreational reasons were utilized in this study.

### **Analysis**

For this project, research questions one, three, five, and six were analyzed through quantitative analysis using SPSS, a software package used for interactive, or batched, statistical analysis. Research questions two, four, and seven were analyzed through qualitative thematic analysis. Qualitative data is information that is expressed in natural language that cannot be easily reduced or summed up by numbers (Leeman & Novak, 2018). Qualitative data is typically

gathered through observations, questions and answers, and document or textual analysis (Leeman & Novak, 2018, p. 2). Thematic analysis is the process of finding recognizable themes, or reoccurring topics, ideas, and patterns, within data to provide insight into communication (Hawkins, 2018). The primary researcher for this project developed themes and categories within those themes based on the responses to research questions two, four, and seven. Themes, and categories within those themes, were developed based on common words and phrases used by the participants. Similar messages were then grouped together to form categories, and categories were grouped together based on similar ideas to form larger themes. Each response was coded according to theme, with some responses featuring multiple messages with multiple codes. Then, frequency counts were conducted for the themes that were identified based on participants' responses.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### Research Question 1

Research question one sought to understand who students report as the most influential person to encourage their interest in higher education. A frequency analysis was conducted using SPSS and showed that family was reported as the most influential person to encourage interest in higher education with a mean of 1.22 and a standard deviation of .66. Participants were asked to rank people, or factors, 1-6 with one being the most influential and six being the least influential. Peers were reported as the second most influential person to encourage interest in higher education with a mean of 2.99 and a standard deviation of 1.19. The ranking results were reported as follows: family, peers, high school institutions ( $M = 3.00, sd = 1.22$ ), college/universities ( $M = 4.20, sd = 1.15$ ), media ( $M = 4.78, sd = 1.27$ ), part-time jobs and co-ops/internships ( $M = 4.82, sd = 1.29$ ).

### Research Question 2

Research question 2 sought to understand what kinds of encouraging messages students received from their perceived most influential person regarding higher education. A thematic analysis was conducted and found that the five most common themes mentioned were success seeking, education seeking, fear avoiding, enjoyment seeking, and expectation fulfillment which are explained in the following section. Please see Table 5 for the most common themes and message frequency of the theme. Theme descriptions are provided with additional context below.

#### *Success Seeking*

For this study, success seeking is defined as pursuing higher education for the purpose of achieving positive desired goals, such as wealth attainment, prosperity, comfortability, or

elevated social status. Success seeking took a variety of forms ranging from financial success to opportunity to self-efficacy. Within the theme of success seeking, there were five distinct message categories: financial success, opportunity, stability, self-betterment, and unspecified general success. The first and most frequently mentioned category for success seeking was financial success. This category is defined as encouragement that centers on financial growth, financial security, benefit packages, and overcoming poverty. Of the 203 responses, 27 messages (13.3%) discussed financial success. For example, one student stated, “Get the skills to pay the bills!” This general sense that in order to have financial security one must obtain a higher education was expressed consistently across financial success messages. In another example, a student said, “My parents told me that with higher education I could get a job that would pay me a lot more. My dad did not go to college and my mom did. My mom makes a lot more money than my dad. They told me I would end up make less money if I never went to college.” The concept that in order to overcome poverty, one must obtain a higher education was frequently expressed, specifically when discussing advancing beyond the pay bracket of one’s parent or parents.

The second most frequently mentioned category for success seeking was opportunity. This category was defined as seeking educational circumstances to allow for the possibility of better experiences, jobs, careers, friends, and partners/spouses. Of the 203 responses, 25 messages (12.3%) reference opportunities provided by higher education. One student stated, “College opens up new opportunities for you. You can get a better job if you go to college.” This message focuses particularly on the idea of job opportunities that are possible through higher education. Another student stated, “They told me that I will be able to get a good job with a college degree. They also said that college was the best experience of my parents lives. Lastly, I

could make new friends and meet my potential spouse.” This message focuses on multiple sentiments captured by this category: jobs, experiences, friends, and partners/spouses.

The third most frequently mentioned category for success seeking was unspecified general success. This category is defined as seeking success, accomplishment, or outcomes without a specified goal or objective. Within the 203 responses, 14 (6.9%) discussed unspecified general success. For example, “They encouraged me that if I go to college I have a better chance of being successful.” This concept that success is tied to higher education without a further specified goal or reasoning was the focal point of this category. Another student stated, “They always wanted me to succeed in whatever I wanted to do, and they thought going to college would help me with my goals.” This message reflects the concept that higher education is the key to success, but does not how those goals are accomplished through higher education.

The fourth most frequently mentioned category for success seeking was stability. This category is defined as encouragement that centers on job stability, comfortability in life and career, and ease of life. Within the 203 responses, 9 (4.4%) discussed stability. For example, “They said that they wanted me to be stable in life once they pass away and I believe that I must be stable so I can rest the way they did.” The concept that in order to have a stable and easy life, one must have a higher education was a common sentiment expressed across this category. In addition, another student stated, “My family was really insistent that I go to college and get a higher education so I could have a good career and not work as hard as they do. They wanted me to do well in college so I could do well with the rest of my life.” This idea that in order to avoid manual labor and secure a life of comfort, one should pursue a higher education was a sentiment felt across participants.



The fifth and final most frequently mentioned category for success seeking was self-efficacy. This category is defined as the ability to make oneself better. For the 203 responses, 3 (1.5%) were classified as self-efficacy. For example, one student stated, “They encouraged me to further my education and make something of myself.” This message of ‘making something of and for oneself’ was reflected across all three responses. In addition, another student stated, “Everyone i know wants me to graduate college and make a life for myself.” The concept that higher education would provide the ability to make oneself better was the focus for all three responses of this category.

**Table 5***Themes for Encouraging Higher Education*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Success Seeking</b>	78	38.4%
• Financial Success	27	13.3%
• Opportunity	25	12.3%
• Unspecified General Success	14	6.9%
• Stability	9	4.4%
• Self-efficacy	3	1.5%
<b>Education Seeking</b>	43	21.2%
• Legacy	14	6.9%
• Education for Education's Sake	12	5.9%
• Topic/Major Specific	9	4.4%
• Skilled & Qualified	8	3.9%
<b>Fear Avoiding</b>	29	14.3%
• General Fear	13	6.4%
• Failure	7	3.4%
• Pride	5	2.5%
• Wasted Time	4	2%
<b>Enjoyment Seeking</b>	37	18.2%
• Encouragement	17	8.4%
• General Enjoyment	13	6.4%
• Change Makers	7	3.4%
<b>Expectation Fulfillment</b>	16	7.9%

### *Education Seeking*

For this study, education seeking is defined as pursuing higher education for the purpose of achieving one's intellectual potential, fulfilling the education standard of one's desired profession, or maintaining the education legacy of one's family. Within the theme of education seeking, there were four distinct message categories: legacy, education for education's sake, topic/major specific and skilled/qualified. The first and most frequently mentioned category for education seeking was legacy. This category was defined as seeking education based on family legacy and family education standard. For the 203 responses, 14 (6.9%) were classified as legacy. One student stated, "My mom works in higher ed. Not going to university was never an option. If we get good grades we're not expected to have jobs." This concept that education is standard family practice without negotiation was a key factor of this category. In another example, one student said, "My mom always told me that college helped her get the career she's in which she's medical assistant and if she didn't go to college I don't know where would we be and made me realize that I wanted to go to college to pursue my career just like my mom did." The idea that one's parent was successful because of higher education so one must also participate in higher education was repeated frequently across this category.

Education for education's sake is the second most frequently mentioned category within education seeking. This category is defined as pursuing higher education because one likes the environment education provides and the purpose found in educating one's self or having a higher degree. Of the 203 responses, 12 (5.9%) were classified as education for education's sake. For example, one student stated, "I want to have a higher education." This expressed interest in having a higher degree but failing to mention a motive or reason was prevalent in this category. In another example, one student said, "Going to the college I attend as a high school student

encouraged me the most to seek higher education. I loved the campus and the 24 hour homework help offered.” This category also included messages like the one above that emphasize the importance of campus resources and offerings within the education environment as a positive influence for higher education.

Topic/major specific is the third most frequently mentioned category within education seeking. Topic/major specific is defined as pursuing higher education in order to study a particular major or topic offered at one’s institution. Of the 203 responses, 9 (4.4%) were classified as topic/major specific. One student said, “There was a documentary about the Body Farm and Dr Bass and from that point I’ve always wanted to go into Forensics and study in the Body Farm.” This message specifically outlining the justification for interest in the major and how it led to the pursuit of higher education accurately summarizes this category. In addition, another student stated, “College is necessary to become a teacher so they said that I can do college so I can become a teacher.” The concept that higher education was chosen because of the intended field of study was a focus throughout this category.

Skilled and qualified is the fourth and final most frequently mentioned category within education seeking. Skilled and qualified is defined as pursuing higher education because of the skills and qualifications an individual already possesses that can be enhanced through education. Of the 203 responses, 8 (3.9%) were classified as skilled and qualified. One student stated, “My parents saw that I enjoyed designing and creating things and encouraged me to major in something that allowed me to put that skill to use.” This message outlines the concept that one’s abilities and interests are appropriate for higher education and can be advanced through higher education. In addition, another student said, “I was able to do it.” This concept that one has the

ability and qualifications to pursue higher education; therefore, one should pursue higher education was common throughout this category.

### ***Fear Avoiding***

For this study, fear avoiding is defined as pursuing higher education for reasons motivated by fear, failure, and avoiding of disappointment. Within the theme of fear avoiding, there were four unique themes: general fear, failure, prideful, and wasted time. The first and most frequently mentioned category for fear avoiding was general fear. This category was defined as pursuing higher education due to messages that elicited fear, or sparked fear without justification or additional context. Of the 203 responses, 13 (6.4%) were classified as general fear. For example, one student said, “Mostly they demeaned uneducated people.” This message provided context for fear-based encouragement of higher education in an effort to avoid being demeaned for being uneducated. In another example, a student said, “You don’t wanna turn out like your mother.” The idea that education could provide a way to avoid repeating family mistakes, errors, or pitfalls through fear-based language was extremely prevalent in this category

The second most frequently mentioned category for fear avoiding was failure. This category was defined as pursuing higher education as a means to avoid the perception of failing and eliciting regret. Of the 203 responses, 7 (3.4%) were classified as failure. One student said, “Most influential was my mom. She always pushes me to do my best and she wants me to go very far with my career. She puts a lot of pressure on me since I’m the first in my family to go to college.” This message exemplifies the idea of pressure coupled with high expectations to provide the foundation for this category. In another example, one student said,

“My mom would do most of my paperwork and all I would do is sign where needed. This told me that she would do unnecessary work to make sure I go to college. She did not ever discuss any other options besides college, and when I had trouble in college, she would make it seem like another option would be a

punishment almost. My brother attended nursing school a few years before me. He dropped out, so I feel like there is a lot of pressure to make it through the program. I guess it was not encouragement, more like the fear of disappointing. College was the only option given to me, and when trade school or going straight to work it was given in a negative way.”

This messages perfectly summarizes the responses within this category. The fear of disappointing, pressure, and effort to avoid regret for others and oneself were continuously repeated.

The third most frequently mentioned category for fear avoiding was prideful. This category was defined as pursuing higher education for the main purpose of making others proud. Of the 203 responses, 5 (2.5%) were classified as prideful. One student said, “Like I said in the previous response, my family said that it is really hard to get a good job, and getting a degree can help with that. They would say that I was smart enough to do better in life, and going to college is a sign of that to them. MY main reason why they are most influential till is because I wanted to make them proud.” All of the messages within this category centered on ideas of pride and making others proud through pursuing higher education. Another student said, “My parents never got the chance to have high education in school cause they lived in Mexico. I’m their first child and I want to attend school for them and for me.” The idea that pursuing higher education for others rather than simply for oneself was repeated throughout this category.

The fourth and final most frequently mentioned category for fear avoiding was wasted time. This category was defined as pursuing higher education because of the fear that one would be wasting time, energy, or ability if they did not. Of the 331 responses 4 (2%) were classified as wasted time. For example, “It would have been a waste not to.” This message encapsulates this category through generalization of wasted time, energy, and ability. In another example, one student said, “They said that if I had the change to go to college I should go I shouldn’t waste

time.” This message discusses the concept of being given an opportunity therefore one must not delay in taking advantage of it.

### ***Enjoyment Seeking***

For this study, enjoyment seeking is defined as pursuing higher education for the purpose of personal fulfillment, excitement, supportive encouragement, or obtaining joy. Within the theme of enjoyment seeking, there were three distinct categories: encouragement, general enjoyment, and change makers. The first and most frequently mentioned category within enjoyment seeking was encouragement. This category was defined as pursuing higher education because of a communicated belief in one’s abilities and talents. Of the 203 responses, 17 (8.4%) were classified as encouragement. For example, one student stated, “They have always told me i can do anything i put my mind to regardless of my special needs.” Messages within this category consistently mention communication that was uplifting and unwavering in belief in one’s potential. In another example, a student said, “If you have a dream, do it. We’re here to support you.” This message does a wonderful job of summarizing the basis for the encouragement category by acknowledging one’s goals and dreams, and empowering them to be fulfilled.

The second most frequently mentioned category within enjoyment seeking was general enjoyment. General enjoyment is defined as pursuing higher education in the interest of excitement, joy, and finding a career one is passionate about. Of the 203 responses, 13 (6.4%) were classified at general enjoyment. One student said, “It’s manly just how fun it can be and how I can explore my talents.” This idea that higher education is fun and allows one to discover oneself was frequently repeated across this category. Another student said, “My family wanted me to be successful and to go into a career that made me happy and gave me all the resources for me to look into the career I wanted my parents took me to college campuses and had me meet

with counselors and advisors.” This message provides additional context for this category by describing how enjoyment can be found through higher education and individuals who aid in the pursuance of one’s passion.

The third and final most frequently mentioned category within enjoyment seeking was change makers. This category was defined as pursuing higher education for the purpose of changing the world, having the power to help others, or changing the perception of oneself or one’s background. Of the 203 responses, 7 (3.4%) were classified as change makers. For example, “Be future, the world needs more people like you so be the change.” Messages within this category consistently reflect ideas that one individual has the ability to change the future. Another student said, “In the Media I saw a lot of young Black females make it but with no education and nothing to fall back if everything goes left. So, I decided if I ever reach the status of more than 500 people know my name they will know I am educated.” This idea that education can be the factor that sparks the change in how one is perceived by the broader community or system was a common occurrence in this category.

### ***Expectation Fulfillment***

For this study, expectation fulfillment is defined as pursuing higher education for the purpose of a conveyed requirement or perceived assumption about oneself, one’s higher education institution, or one’s intended career. Of the 203 responses, 16 (7.8%) were classified as expectation fulfillment. For example, one student said, “I do not wish to pursue higher education, I am merely being forced to.” The notion that one is being required, or forced, to pursue higher education with or without reasoning was a dominating factor within this theme. In another example, a student said, “In high school, we often had senior meetings with our college and career counselors in which they would remind us of the importance of attending college and



getting a degree. My high school also required every senior to apply for the Tennessee Promise scholarship.” This message provides additional context for this theme by describing how some individuals in this category were required to apply for or attend higher education institutions by the systems they are part of.

### **Research Question 3**

Research question three sought to understand who students report as the most influential person to discourage their interest in higher education. A frequency analysis was conducted using SPSS and showed that peers were reported as the most influential person to discourage interest in higher education with a mean of 2.79 and a standard deviation of 1.50. Participants were asked to rank people, or factors, 1-6 with one being the most discouraging and six being the least discouraging. The ranking results were reported as follows: peers, media, part-time jobs and co-ops/internships, family, high school institutions, and colleges/universities. Media was reported as the second most influential person to discourage interest in higher education with a mean of 2.88 and a standard deviation of 1.51.

### **Research Question 4**

Research question four sought to understand what kinds of discouraging messages students received from their perceived most influential person regarding higher education. Of the 331 participants, there were only 46 discouraging messages. The four most common themes mentioned were success seeking, ignorance, hustle and media culture, and education inequity which are explained in the following section. Please see Table 6 for the most common themes and message frequency of the theme. Theme descriptions are provided with additional context below.

**Table 6***Themes for Discouraging Higher Education*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Success Seeking</b>	25	54.3%
• Financial Instability	11	23.9%
• Unnecessary	10	21.7%
• Time Management	3	6.5%
• Legacy	1	2.2%
<b>Ignorance</b>	13	28.3%
• Not Capable	9	19.6%
• Difficult	3	6.5%
• Demeaning	1	2.2%
<b>Education Inequity</b>	5	10.9%
• Systematic Oversight	3	6.6%
• Topic/Major Specific	1	2.2%
• Value Misalignment	1	2.2%
<b>Hustle &amp; Media Culture</b>	3	6.5%

### *Success Seeking*

For this study, success seeking, in the context of discouraging messages, is defined as not pursuing higher education for the purpose of achieving financial stability, venturing into immediate career goals, saving time and resources, or following in the footsteps of one's family or friends. Within the theme of success seeking, there were four distinct categories: financial instability, unnecessary, time management, and legacy. The first and most frequently mentioned category within success seeking was financial instability. This category was defined as not pursuing higher education in order to save money, avoid student loan debt, or acquire an immediate salary. Of the 46 responses, 11 (23.9%) were classified as financial instability. For example, one student said, "College in general is not affordable especially if you want to actually dive into it. You can be awarded scholarships and grants but you have to have top notch grades. So the people who have passion but can't afford education are left behind or have to get loans. And overall the money side of higher education is stressful and discouraging in itself." This response provides an all-encompassing summary for this category by describing the struggle students face to afford higher education and the stress of obtaining student loan debt. In another response, one student said, "That it is a waste of government/private money, that trade schools or entrepreneurship is a better method of profit, that colleges teach what can already be learnt for free, that all you earn is a piece of paper and bragging rights." The notion that higher education is a waste of money with little to no payoff was consistent throughout this category.

The second most frequently mentioned category within success seeking was unnecessary. This category was defined as not pursuing higher education because one can achieve financial and career success without it, or that higher education itself provides little to no purpose in goal achievement. Of the 46 responses, 10 (21.7%) were defined as unnecessary. One student said, "I

have been told by some individuals as well as from personal experience that a higher education degree is not required to be successful financially and you can achieve your goals without one.” The idea that higher education does not directly correlate to financial success or personal and professional success because goal achievement is not tied to education was repeated throughout this category. In addition, another student said, “Some of my friends said that there is no point to college.” There were several messages within this category that referenced the idea that college itself provides little to no purpose and is without merit.

The third most frequently mentioned category within success seeking was time management. This category was defined as not pursuing higher education in order to save time, avoid wasting time, or fear of delays or lags in goal pursuit due to the time commitment higher education requires. Though contradictory in nature, goal pursuit in this theme can be delayed or accomplished sooner depending on time management. Of the 46 responses, 3 (6.5%) were defined as time management. For example, one student said, “The friends I had never talked about their future, it was always going with what happened in the moment. They also said college seemed like a waste of time.” The idea that college was a ‘waste of time’ was the key factor within this category, and was communicated directly and indirectly. Another student said, “Not everyone has to have a degree to be successful. Could that possibly be me? Am I just wasting my time?” This concept that achieving goals and acquiring success can be accomplished sooner without the delay of college was the core principle of this category.

The fourth and final most frequently mentioned category within success seeking was legacy. For discouraging messages, this category was defined as not seeking education based on family legacy and family education standard. Of the 46 responses, 1 (2.2%) was defined as legacy. This student said, “My grandparents influenced me that I could do anything I wanted to

do and it was a great idea to go out there and get more education than what I had.” This message, though positive in tone and content, was listed as a message of discouragement. This affirms that these messages of legacy can often be conflicting, and portrayed as both positive and negative.

### ***Ignorance***

For this study, ignorance is defined as not pursuing higher education for fear that one lacks knowledge, qualification, or intelligence necessary for higher education. Within the theme of ignorance, there are three distinct categories: not capable, difficult, and demeaning. The first and most frequently reported category within ignorance was not capable. This category was defined as not pursuing higher education because one lacks the tangible knowledge, skills, or abilities necessary for academic success. Of the 46 responses 9 (19.6%) were classified as not capable. One student said, “My middle school teacher said I was pathetic and I should give up on art. This made me want to go even more, out of spite.” This idea of being told one is not good enough or smart enough to be successful by a prior educator was consistent throughout this category. Another student said, “Not going to disclose what family members/members it was, but they didn’t think it was the right fit for me because I grew up doing poor in school but in high school I proved that wasn’t the case and now I’m doing extremely well through my first year of college as well.” Similarly, the concept that because someone did poorly in school at one point means that they will continue to do poorly was a frequent mention within this category.

The second most frequently mentioned category within ignorance was difficult. This category was defined as choosing to not pursue higher education because the process is not an easy endeavor or one lacks the effort, support, or skills needed to understand the content and accomplish the requirements. Of the 46 responses, 3 (6.5%) were classified as difficult. For example, “Well, right after I left to make a better life, my parents made it very hard to set up my

scholarships. College was a way to control me, and now, I just took that away from them.” The idea that family members or friends can or would intentionally hinder the higher education process in order to hold back others was a message consistent throughout each response in this category. In another response, one student said, “What are you going to get if you finish study you will get married and you will stop. So don’t make you life hard but it’s not true.” Similarly, the idea that higher education will make life more difficult, or impede the path one is already on, was a focal point of this category.

The third and final most frequently mention category within ignorance was demeaned. This category was defined as choosing not to pursue higher education to avoid loss of dignity or respect from one’s family members and community. Of the 46 responses, 1 (2.2%) was classified as demeaned. This student said, “Being from a rural county, a lot of people see college as something they and their kids don’t need. They treat people who value college badly because it doesn’t fit their lifestyle choices. We’re always told to respect the decision not to go, but when it comes to respecting deciding to go to college it’s different.” This message discusses the idea that higher education is not respected or supported by the broader community to which one belongs; therefore, to pursue higher education would be disrespectful to others.

### ***Education Inequity***

For this study, education inequity was defined not pursuing higher education due to bias and unfair educational policies or practices, or lack of systemic support that impacts educational performance. Within the theme of education inequity, there are three unique categories: systematic oversight, topic/major, and value misalignment. The first and most frequently mentioned category within education inequity was systematic oversight. This category was defined as not pursuing higher education due to failure caused by the education system, policies,

practices, or structures. Of the 46 responses, 3 (6.5%) were classified as systematic oversight. In one example, a student said, “My college advisor, and just about everyone I have met at my college have been absolutely no help whatsoever. Anytime I have reached out for help/advise, I am ignored or told that there is no way of fixing it.” This sentiment provides an excellent summary of the idea that there is a lack of systemic support coming from educators, advisors, and college personnel. This idea was consistent throughout this category. Another student said, “My favorite told me I had to make it because they aren’t going to and also I need to be stable on my own. My school did not really prepare for school they just expected us to know things we didn’t also my school barely explained anything about college to us.” Similarly, this message reinforces the above notion that the system is not preparing students adequately for the world of higher education, and if they seek help, they are not being reaffirmed along the way.

The second most frequently mentioned category within education inequity was topic/major. This category was defined as not pursuing higher education due to the fact that one’s major interests, or topic of interest, are not offered at higher education institutions. Of the 46 responses, 1 (2.2%) was classified as topic/major. This student said, “Comanche helicopters.” For this message, the student reported that their major was helicopters, and that they reported attending Apache Helicopter School, classified as an ‘other institution of higher education’. Therefore, this student was interested in studying Comanche helicopters, which is a topic not traditionally offered at institutions of higher education.

The third and final most frequently mentioned category within education inequity is value misalignment. This category was defined as not pursuing higher education because one’s personal values regarding higher education cannot be fulfilled, or will be compromised, at a higher education institution. Of the 46 responses, 1 (2.2%) was classified as value misalignment.

This student said, “College is a scam they take money just because and they teach far left ideas.” The concept that higher education is a false narrative to gain money and push a political agenda was the forefront of this message.

### ***Hustle & Media Culture***

For this study, hustle and media culture was defined as not pursuing higher education due to messages and imagery portrayed by influencers on social media regarding side hustles and entrepreneurship, and the money procurement that accompanies their lifestyles. Of the 46 responses, 3 (6.5%) were classified as hustle and media culture. For example, “With social media always showing the highlights of everyone’s life sometimes it can be discouraging. What I mean by this is that all you see on social media is people traveling, making fast money, not going to college, and overall living a simple life. Seeing things like that makes you wonder if you want to buckle down and put your head in the books; or do you just want to see where life takes you.” The concept that one can have a successful, lavish lifestyle, as portrayed by social media influencers, by not going to college was the dominating message of this theme. Similarly, another student said, “One major thing that seems to be changing is the importance that media places on higher education. Influencers on apps like Instagram and TikTok seem to be successful without a higher education, and their lifestyles look more appealing than studying and working hard.” The idea that one lifestyle is more appealing than the other based on social media was a driving force for this theme.

### **Research Question 5A**

Research question five A sought to understand whether or not students differ in who they perceive as the most influential in encouraging their interest in higher education. Participants were asked to rank people, or factors, 1-6 with one being the most influential and six being the



least influential. The ranking results were reported as follows: family, peers, high school institutions, college/universities, media, part-time jobs and co-ops/internships. Each category was calculated in SPSS with the lowest mean being most influential, and the highest mean being least influential. Rural FGCS reported family as being the most influential in encouraging higher education with a mean of 1.04. The remainder means were as follows: peers ( $M = 2.96$ ), high school institutions ( $M = 3.30$ ), colleges/universities ( $M = 4.04$ ), part-time jobs and co-ops/internships ( $M = 4.78$ ), and media ( $M = 4.85$ ). Not rural FGCS reported family as being the most influential in encouraging higher education with a mean of 1.38. The remainder means were as follows: high school institutions ( $M = 2.88$ ), peers ( $M = 2.94$ ), colleges/universities ( $M = 4.15$ ), media ( $M = 4.68$ ), and part-time jobs and co-ops/internships ( $M = 4.97$ ). Rural not FGCS reported family as being the most influential in encouraging higher education with a mean of 1.17. The remainder means were as follows: high school institutions ( $M = 2.92$ ), peers ( $M = 3.06$ ), colleges/universities ( $M = 4.08$ ), part-time jobs and co-ops/internships ( $M = 4.78$ ), and media ( $M = 5.00$ ). Not rural not FGCS reported family as being the most influential in encouraging higher education with a mean of 1.16. The remainder means were as follows: peers ( $M = 3.00$ ), high school institutions ( $M = 3.02$ ), colleges/universities ( $M = 4.32$ ), part-time jobs and co-ops/internships ( $M = 4.75$ ), and media ( $M = 4.76$ ).

### **Research Question 5B**

Research question five B sought to understand whether or not students differ in who they perceive as the most influential in discouraging their interest in higher education. Participants were asked to rank people, or factors, 1-6 with one being the most influential and six being the least influential. The ranking results were reported as follows: family, peers, high school institutions, college/universities, media, part-time jobs and co-ops/internships. Each category

was calculated in SPSS with the lowest mean being most influential, and the highest mean being least influential. Rural FGCS reported media as being the most influential in discouraging higher education with a mean of 2.00. The remainder means were as follows: part-time jobs and co-ops/internships ( $M = 2.60$ ), family ( $M = 3.60$ ), peers ( $M = 3.60$ ), high school institutions ( $M = 4.40$ ), and colleges/universities ( $M = 4.80$ ). Not rural FGCS reported media as being the most influential in discouraging higher education with a mean of 2.20. The remainder means were as follows: peers ( $M = 2.73$ ), part-time jobs and co-ops/internships ( $M = 3.27$ ), colleges/universities ( $M = 4.00$ ), family ( $M = 4.20$ ) and high school institutions ( $M = 4.60$ ). Rural not FGCS reported peers as being the most influential in discouraging higher education with a mean of 2.13. The remainder means were as follows: part-time jobs and co-ops/internships ( $M = 2.38$ ), media ( $M = 2.75$ ), high school institutions ( $M = 4.13$ ), colleges/universities ( $M = 4.75$ ), and family ( $M = 4.88$ ). Not rural not FGCS reported peers as being the most influential in discouraging higher education with a mean of 2.90. The remainder means were as follows: part-time jobs and co-ops/internships ( $M = 3.25$ ), family ( $M = 3.35$ ), high school institutions ( $M = 3.45$ ), media ( $M = 3.65$ ), colleges/universities ( $M = 4.40$ ).

### **Research Question 5C**

Research questions five C sought to understand whether or not students differ in what kinds of encouraging and discouraging messages they received from their perceived most influential person regarding higher education. A chi-square test was used to explore frequency differences with all 17 categories of encouraging messages and significant differences were found:  $\chi^2 (48) = 68.57, p < .05$ . However, these results are problematic to interpret due to low cell counts in many cells. As a result, a second chi-square test using frequencies for the bolded categories only found no significant results:  $\chi^2 (12) = 16.04, p > .05$ . A chi-square test was used

to explore frequency difference with all 11 categories of discouraging messages; however, the test failed to run due to low cell counts in many cells. As a result, a second chi-square test using frequencies for the bolded categories found no significant results:  $\chi^2(9) = 11.15, p > .05$ . Please see Table 7 and 8 for the most common encouraging and discouraging themes across student types and message frequency of the theme.

### **Research Question 6**

Research question six sought to understand whether or not students differ in what factors they report as being the most influential in their choice of higher education institution. A one-way ANOVA was computed comparing attitude factors most influential in higher education choice to student type. A one-way ANOVA revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in attitude factors most influential in higher education choice between two groups. A significant difference was found ( $F(3, 271) = 4.73, p < .05$ ). Tukey's HSD Post-Hoc Test for multiple comparisons found significant differences between not rural FGCS ( $M = 2.93, sd = .73$ ) and rural not FGCS ( $M = 3.37, sd = .71$ ). There were no significant differences between the remaining groups: rural FGCS ( $M = 3.27, sd = .54$ ) and not rural not FGCS ( $M = 3.04, sd = .64$ ).

A one-way ANOVA was also computed comparing recreational factors most influential in higher education choice to student type. No significant results were found ( $F(3, 268) = 1.92, p < .05$ ). No significant differences were found for recreation factors most influential in higher education choice and the four groups: rural FGCS students ( $M = 1.90, sd = .86$ ), not rural FGCS students ( $M = 1.71, sd = .57$ ), rural not FGCS ( $M = 1.81, sd = .90$ ), and not rural not FGCS ( $M = 1.61, sd = .59$ ).

**Table 7***Themes for Encouraging Higher Education by Group*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>FGCS &amp; Rural</b>	<b>FGCS Not Rural</b>	<b>Rural Not FGCS</b>	<b>Not Rural Not FGCS</b>
<b>Success Seeking</b>	10 (45.5%)	30 (46.2%)	7 (22.6%)	39 (38.6%)
• Financial Success	1 (4.5%)	12 (18.5%)	1 (3.2%)	12 (11.9%)
• Opportunity	5 (22.7%)	6 (9.2%)	6 (19.4%)	12 (11.9%)
• Unspecified General Success	2 (9%)	6 (9.2%)	0 (0%)	7 (6.9%)
• Stability	1 (4.5%)	5 (7.7%)	0 (0%)	6 (5.9%)
• Self-efficacy	1 (4.5%)	1 (1.5%)	0 (0%)	2 (2%)
<b>Education Seeking</b>	5 (22.7%)	7 (10.8%)	8 (25.8%)	23 (22.8%)
• Legacy	1 (4.5%)	1 (1.5%)	0 (0%)	11 (10.9%)
• Education for Education's Sake	0 (0%)	3 (4.6%)	3 (9.7%)	2 (2%)
• Topic/Major Specific	2 (9%)	1 (1.5%)	1 (3.2%)	4 (4%)
• Skilled & Qualified	2 (9%)	2 (3.1%)	4 (12.9%)	2 (2%)
<b>Fear Avoiding</b>	1 (4.5%)	13 (20%)	4 (12.9%)	10 (10%)
• General Fear	1 (4.5%)	6 (9.2%)	1 (3.2%)	4 (4%)
• Failure	0 (0%)	3 (4.6%)	1 (3.2%)	4 (4%)
• Pride	0 (0%)	4 (6.2%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)
• Wasted Time	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (6.5%)	1 (1%)
<b>Enjoyment Seeking</b>	6 (27.3%)	12 (18.5%)	9 (29%)	20 (20%)
• Encouragement	4 (18.2%)	9 (13.9%)	3 (9.7%)	6 (5.9%)
• General Enjoyment	0 (0%)	1 (1.5%)	4 (12.9%)	5 (5%)
• Change Makers	2 (9%)	2 (3.1%)	2 (6.5%)	4 (4%)
<b>Expectation Fulfillment</b>	0 (0%)	3 (4.6%)	3 (9.7%)	9 (8.9%)

**Table 8***Themes for Discouraging Higher Education by Group*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>FGCS &amp; Rural</b>	<b>FGCS Not Rural</b>	<b>Rural Not FGCS</b>	<b>Not Rural Not FGCS</b>
<b>Success Seeking</b>	2 (40%)	7 (46.7%)	5 (55.6%)	9 (56.3%)
• Financial Instability	0 (0%)	4 (26.7%)	2 (22.2%)	5 (31.5%)
• Unnecessary	2 (40%)	1 (6.7%)	3 (33.3%)	3 (18.8%)
• Time Management	0 (0%)	2 (13.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
• Legacy	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (6.3%)
<b>Ignorance</b>	1 (20%)	5 (33.3%)	1 (11.1%)	6 (37.5%)
• Not Capable	0 (0%)	4 (26.7%)	1 (11.1%)	5 (31.5%)
• Difficult	1 (20%)	1 (6.7%)	0 (0%)	1 (6.3%)
• Demeaning	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
<b>Education Inequity</b>	0 (0%)	1 (6.7%)	3 (33.3%)	1 (6.3%)
• Systematic Oversight	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (22.25)	1 (6.3%)
• Topic/Major Specific	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (11.1%)	0 (0%)
• Value Misalignment	0 (0%)	1 (6.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
<b>Hustle &amp; Media Culture</b>	1 (20%)	2 (13.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

### **Research Question 7**

Research question seven sought to understand what reasons students identify for selecting their major or field of interest when attending an institution of higher education. A thematic analysis was conducted and found that the five most common themes mentioned were interest in field/topic, exploring options, intent to transfer, job security/stability, and parent/family persuasion. Please see Table 9 for the most common themes and message frequency of the theme. Theme descriptions are provided with additional context below.

The first and overwhelmingly most frequently mentioned theme was interest in field/topic. For this study, interest in field/topic was defined as selecting one's major because of a genuine interest in the field, job, topic, or career. Of the 319 responses, 268 (84%) were classified as interest in field/topic. For example, one student said, "I selected Criminal Justice as my major because I want to work in a field that involves forensics." The sentiment that one selects a major specifically for a field of interest was the dominating idea of this theme. Another student said, "I always enjoyed building and working with electronics. This major just seemed perfect with my hobbies." Numerous students also mentioned the idea that they are pursuing a major based on a prior interest or hobby that relates to the field.

The second most frequently mentioned theme was exploring options. For this study, exploring options was defined as selecting one's major in order to resolve indecisiveness, sample the area of study, or explore a new field or area of interest. Of the 319 responses 21 (6.6%) were classified as exploring options. One student said, "I still do not know what I want my major to be." The idea that one selected a major because they were undecided or unsure of their interests was extremely prevalent within this theme. In another example, one student said, "It gave me more time to decide my actual major. I thought it best to complete all my general courses first."

The idea that one will pursue general studies to sample different topics, and then declare their major later in the college experience was frequently mentioned within this theme.

The third most frequently mentioned theme was intent to transfer. For this study, intent to transfer was defined as selecting one's major because it adequately transitions to another institution, specifically when transitioning from a 2-year institution to a 4-year institution. Of the 319 responses, 15 (4.7%) were classified as intent to transfer. For example, one student said, "I will be changing it to supply chain once I transfer to a four year." This idea of majoring in something temporarily that will set one up for success at a later stage at another institution was a core principle within this theme. In another example, a student said, "Because I want to do project management with sustainability when I transfer." Similarly, the idea that one will major in their true area of interest at a different institution was the repeated concept within this theme.

The fourth most frequently mentioned theme was job security/stability. For this study, job security/stability was defined as selecting one's major because it provides likeliness for a job in high demand with reliable benefits and consistent pay. Of the 319 responses, 8 (2.5%) were classified as job security/stability. One student said, "Because it is an essential career that will always be in demand. I can start it immediately and begin making a liveable wage whereas with a 4 year college there is no guarantee of an actual job in the area you have chosen, ever. And there is usually large debt to go with that 4 year program." The concept that one should select a major because it is in high demand and provides an immediate, standard pay was the dominating idea for this theme. Another student said, "Increasing in demand for jobs relating to this major and average annual income provided by said jobs." In similar fashion, messages within this theme reinforced the desire to have stable pay and consistent work.

**Table 9***Themes for Major Choice*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Interest in Field/Topic	268	84%
Exploring Options	21	6.6%
Intent to Transfer	15	4.7%
Job Security/Stability	8	2.5%
Parent/Family Persuasion	7	2.2%



The fifth and final most frequently mentioned theme was parent/family persuasion. For this study, parent/family persuasion was defined as selecting one's major based on the influence of one's family or parents. Of the 319 responses, 7 (2.2%) were classified as parent/family persuasion. For example, "My dad pushed me to become a machinist and work for a medical company." The idea that an individual selected their major because a parent encouraged, or pushed, them to was the key factor within this theme. In another example, one student said, "My sister told me to." Similarly, the concept that one was required to major in a specific topic because a family member told them to was prevalent within every message of this theme.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to gather information regarding VAS influences and their memorable messages, both encouraging and discouraging, that inform a rural FGCS's decision to attend an institution of higher education in the state of Tennessee. This study utilized theory and prior research from VAS literature, memorable message literature, and higher education literature to inform research questions and subsequent survey questions. Though this study placed a particular emphasis on understanding the perspective of rural FGCS, other student types were analyzed equally, such as: not rural FGCS, rural not FGCS, and not rural not FGCS. This study revealed insight into the perspectives of Tennessee college students, and aided in furthering the ongoing conversation about higher education barriers in the state of Tennessee.

### **Explanation of Findings**

Research question one sought to understand who students report as most influential to encourage their interest in higher education. Results showed that family was the most influential source factor to encourage higher education, followed by peers, high school institutions, colleges/universities, media, and part-time jobs and co-ops/internships at the end. Based on prior VAS research, the concept that family was reported as the most influential source factor comes as no surprise. Prior studies show parents and family members have a critical impact on an individual's VAS, with some scholars arguing that parents play the primary role in determining their children's vocational choices (Jablin, 2011; Aley & Levine, 2020; Levine & Hoffner, 2006). Having known this information from prior studies, it was assumed and anticipated that family would be reported as the most influential factor to encourage higher education.

Similarly, peers/friends being reported as the second most influential source factor came as no surprise. Prior VAS research notes that children and adolescents spend over half of their

time any given week with their peers and friends (Jablin, 2011). Prior research has established that peers and friends often discuss educational goals and aspirations, and oftentimes those discussions inform individuals about which goals and aspirations are socially acceptable and which are not (Jablin, 2011; Levine & Hoffner, 2006; Aley & Levine, 2020). These findings reaffirm prior research and provide verification that Tennessee students are influenced most by family and peers in regards to higher education encouragement.

Research question two sought to understand what kinds of encouraging messages students received from their perceived most influential factor regarding higher education. The most frequent theme was success seeking, defined as pursuing higher education for the purpose of achieving desired goals, such as wealth attainment, prosperity, comfortability, or elevated social status. Within the theme of success seeking, the most frequently reported message category was financial success. This category within success seeking was defined as encouragement that centers on financial growth, financial security, benefit packages, and overcoming poverty. Messages that encouraged higher education for financial success all centered on the idea of long-term wealth attainment and salary opportunities available to students over time who obtain a college degree. The frequency of financial success messages may be due to the current economic nature of the state of Tennessee. Currently, 35 of the 95 counties (37%) in the state of Tennessee are rural communities at-risk of becoming economically distressed or are economically distressed (tnAchieves, 2021). The following conditions can result in economically distressed classifications: low per capita income, low per capita taxable values, high unemployment, high under-employment, low weekly earning wages compared to the state average, low housing values compared to the state average, high percentages of the population receiving public assistance, high poverty levels compared to the state average, and lack of year-

round stable employment opportunities (Law Insider, 2021). In addition, the most frequently reported household income was \$32,048 or less with 128 (38.7%) responses, which was the lowest income option within the survey. With 37% of the state facing various economic barriers listed above, and 128 of the 331 students surveyed classifying within the lowest household income option available, it is perfectly justifiable that one would be encouraged to pursue higher education based on messages regarding financial stability and financial growth. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that within this study, families who do not want their students to fall victim to social reproduction, or holding the same occupation or vocation as one's parent(s) or holding a position with the same socioeconomic status as one's parent(s), encourage the pursuit of higher education in order to obtain higher socioeconomic status (Lucas, 2011).

The second most frequently mentioned category within success seeking was opportunity, defined as seeking educational circumstances to allow for the possibility of better experiences, jobs, careers, friends, and partners/spouses. Based on the nature of the messages within this category, opportunity and financial success go hand in hand; therefore, it makes sense that they would be reported within two degrees of one another. Messages classified within the category of opportunity primarily focused on the idea that obtaining a higher education would provide better job opportunities. Social reproduction, as mentioned above, is a commonly studied feature of memorable message literature, specifically studies regarding higher education for FGCS and rural students. Very often, students of blue-collar families are limited by social reproduction, thus repeating the same occupation or vocation as one's parent(s) (Lucas, 2011). It is further justifiable to assume that families who want their students to have access to jobs outside of blue-collar roles would encourage higher education to promote social mobility.

Research question three sought to understand who students report as most influential to discourage their interest in higher education. Results showed that peers were reported as the most influential source factor to discourage interest in higher education. Based on prior VAS research, next to family, peers and friends are naturally perceived as the second most influential VAS source. Prior research has established that discussions between peers inform individuals about which goals and aspirations are socially acceptable and which are not through messages of approval or disapproval (Jablin, 2011; Levine & Hoffner, 2006; Aley & Levine, 2020). These findings prove that individuals assess their occupational interests and adjust accordingly to what their friends and peers are interested in, thus determining what is socially acceptable or not.

Media being ranked as the second most influential source factor to discourage interest in higher education came as a surprise. Prior VAS and memorable message research placed very little emphasis on the importance media has on a student's VAS. The majority of these prior studies place emphasis on indirect messages received by film, television, and print media, with little to no emphasis placed on the influence of social media, possibly due to its newness comparable to scholarly articles studying VAS, memorable messages, and media (Knapp, et al., 1981; Bandura, 2001; Aley & Levine, 2020; Levine & Hoffner, 2006; Myers et al., 2011; Ingersoll & Adams, 1992). On average, students between the ages of 13 and 18 spend nine hours a day consuming entertainment media, and mobile device media accounts for 46% of all screen time for teens (Stomp Out Bullying, 2021). Oftentimes, students can spend more time throughout the day consuming media than they do communicating with family or peers. Social media specifically is a crucial part of a student's day to day life and media consumption. Social media, and the influencers present on social media platforms being consumed, provides critical messages to students that can be perceived as more important or persuasive based purely on the

amount of time spent engaging with the platform. This result opens a window for future scholars in the study of the consistency and repetitiveness of the way VAS and memorable messages are communicated and portrayed across social media platforms and the potential its consumption has to impact a student's goals and choices.

Research question four sought to understand what kinds of discouraging messages students received from their perceived most influential factor regarding higher education. The most frequently reported message theme was success seeking. Success seeking in the context of discouraging messages was defined as not pursuing higher education for the purpose of achieving financial stability, venturing into immediate career goals, saving time and resources, or following in the footsteps of one's family or friends. Within the theme of success seeking, the most frequently reported message category was financial instability. This category within success seeking was defined as not pursuing higher education in order to save money, avoid student loan debt, or acquire an immediate salary. It is important and fascinating to note that the results of this research question run parallel to the results for research question two. Both are financially motivated, but simply have different timelines for motivation. Encouraging messages regarding finances focused on long-term financial success and wealth attainment through higher education, while messages regarding finances that were discouraging focused on short-term financial success and avoiding debt and financial instability that could be caused by the cost of higher education. Prior higher education studies established that prior to becoming FGCS, prospective FGCS identified family, finances, racial/ethnic discrimination, lack of college-education role models, and lack of preparation and/or desire, while their non-FGCS peers only identified finances and school stress as perceive barriers to higher education (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). Both FGCS and non-FGCS identified finances as barriers to higher education

success, regardless of their unique backgrounds. Furthermore, rural families are facing well-documented decrease in income levels that stems from unemployment and underemployment in rural communities (Paterson, 2020). These students understand that higher education can come with a substantial price tag, especially for those who plan to matriculate past a 2-year institution. For students who have immediate financial barriers to higher education, it is likely that the idea of incurring debt, or significant out-of-pocket cost, is undesirable even if there is opportunity for long-term growth, because the immediate cost is not worth the long-term possibility. Without knowledge of scholarships and grants that can cover higher education costs and alleviate financial strain, it is safe to assume that these students are more likely to be influenced negatively based on financial means for short-term financial growth.

The second most frequently mentioned category within success seeking was unnecessary, defined as not pursuing higher education because one can achieve financial and career success without it, or that higher education itself provides little to no purpose in goal attainment. It is also important to note that these messages directly contradict those of the category of opportunity in the encouraging messages mentioned in research question two. While the category of opportunity encouraged higher education because of the role education has in goal attainment, this category of unnecessary discourages higher education because of the role education does not have in goal attainment. A large majority of the messages categorized as unnecessary were specifically mentioned to be transmitted by peers or friends. Currently, a considerable amount of memorable message literature regarding higher education and FGCS and rural students centers on messages transmitted by parents and family, with very little research regarding messages transmitted by peers. The findings of this study provide an opportunity for future exploration regarding memorable messages received by peers. One of the most common ideas communicated

in the messages for research question four revolved around friends saying that there was no point in going to college. This study has proved that messaging from peers is highly impactful in perception and decision making regarding higher education.

Research question five explored whether or not students differ in who they perceive as the most influential factor in encouraging interest in higher education. All student categories (rural FGCS, not rural FGCS, rural not FGCS, and not rural not FGCS) reported family as being the most influential factor in encouraging higher education. Based on the results of research question one, and the results of prior VAS studies, it was anticipated that each unique student type would continue to report family as being the most influential factor to encourage higher education (Jablin, 2011; Aley & Levine, 2020; Levine & Hoffner, 2006).

Though these results came as no surprise and were anticipated, the results of research question five B were intriguing. Research question five B sought to understand whether or not students differ in who they perceive as the most influential factor in discouraging higher education. Rural FGCS reported media as being the most influential in discouraging higher education. Not rural FGCS also reported media as being the most influential in discouraging higher education. Rural not FGCS reported peers as being the most influential in discouraging higher education. Not rural not FGCS also reported peers as being the most influential in discouraging higher education. Based on the results of research question three and prior research mentioned above, it was assumed that peers would continue to be reported as the most influential factor in discouraging higher education; therefore, it was surprising to see an even split amongst students with half reporting peers and the other half reporting media as the most discouraging. The most intriguing element of these results is that both categories of FGCS reported media as being the most influential factor to discourage higher education. Higher education scholars have



established that FGCS report having significantly less support from family, specifically emotional, informational, and financial support compared to their peers who are non-FGCS (Ma, et al., 2021). In addition, for those FGCS who do report having significant emotional support from family in regards to academic pursuits, they simultaneously report having less significant informational support in navigating college and career opportunities (Ma, et al., 2021). Gibbons and Borders (2010) established that one of the many barriers to higher education for FGCS is a lack of college-educated role models; therefore, it is likely that FGCS are more susceptible to being influenced by information regarding higher education from role models in media, rather than other VAS sources who lack informational support regarding higher education. If they look to media figures as role models, and admire their lifestyles, work, and social influence, then they may be more likely to follow their lead when it comes to vocational choices like higher education.

Research question five C sought to understand whether or not students differ in what kind of encouraging and discouraging messages they received from their perceived most influential factor regarding higher education. Multiple chi-square tests were used to explore frequency differences for both encouraging and discouraging messages, and no significant differences were found for encouraging or discouraging messages between student types (rural FGCS, not rural FGCS, rural not FGCS, and not rural not FGCS). No student type received more or less messages of a particular theme than any other student type. These results are promising because they reveal that no student group is being alienated or persuaded by receiving specific or specialized messages that are unfamiliar to other groups.

Research question six sought to understand whether or not students differ in what factors they report as being the most influential in their choice of higher education institution.

Significant differences were found between not rural FGCS and rural not FGCS for attitude factors, but no differences for any groups on recreation. Attitude factors included ideas and attitudes toward their particular institution based on institution reputation, campus life experience, intentional choice of institution, etc. These results reveal that FGCS from urban and suburban areas and rural students that are not FGCS are not aligned in their attitudes toward their specified institution. These results provide an opportunity for further analysis of these two groups and their reasoning for selecting their particular higher education institution, especially whether these students chose those institutions or were required to attend them. In addition, these results further ideas regarding the historically limited access FGCS and rural student have to higher education institutions that are elite or selective, instead requiring those students to attend local institutions with more affordable price tags (Paterson, 2020; Ma, et al., 2021). This study has shown that their attitude regarding the overall college choice process differs from the experience of other student groups; therefore, there is opportunity for future analysis regarding higher education attitude factors for these student groups.

Research question seven sought to understand what reasons students self-identify for selecting their major or field of interest when attending an institution of higher education. The overwhelmingly most frequently mentioned theme was interest in field/topic. For this study, interest in field/topic was defined as selecting one's major because of a genuine interest in the field, job, topic, or career. These results came as no surprise based on prior higher education memorable message research. Nazione et al. (2011) found that academic-related memorable messages from family members and educational instructors were mostly positive, and related to ideas of perseverance, hard work, and belief in one's self. Wang's (2012) study furthered Nazione et al.'s (2011) findings with results grounded in the ideas of academic success based on

potential and support. Therefore, it was assumed that the VAS memorable messages that students received which influenced major choice would be positive and centered on one's personal success and potential. Messages regarding interest in field/topic were highly personalized and based on one's own ability to succeed within that particular field. Though reaffirming for this area of study, these results were not unexpected.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This study opens the door for several theoretical advancements within the topics featured. First, there seems to be a considerable theoretical lag in literature regarding media in both VAS research and memorable message research. Based on the findings within this study, media plays an important role in VAS and memorable messages. Current VAS literature focuses on the role media plays as an indirect communicator, or bystander, portraying this source as indirectly communicating to individuals (Jablin, 2011). This study has revealed that individuals receive direct communication from media, specifically social media, which features curated and highly personalized content on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Individuals now receive direct communication from the media they consume that systemically shapes their perception of careers and higher education, thus directly impacting their VAS. Based on the results of this study, media could have the potential to become the most influential source factor behind family within the coming years.

Similarly, current memorable message literature focuses the idea that in order for messages to be classified as 'memorable messages' they must be intentionally communicated (Knapp, et al., 1981). Based on the results of this study regarding the influence of media and the messages it transmits, this may no longer be wholly accurate. When considering media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, influencers have a firm presence within the lives of their followers.

The messages they transmit do not have to be intentionally communicated in order to have a profound impact on the receiver. One student reported, “One major thing that seems to be changing is the importance that media places on higher education. Influencers on apps like Instagram and TikTok seem to be successful without a higher education, and their lifestyles look more appealing than studying and working hard.” The way influencers portray their lives and their messages regarding their lives have the ability to transmit memorable messages without specific intention. Instead, for influencers, these messages are just content creation. Furthermore, another student reported, “With social media always showing the highlights of everyone’s life sometimes it can be discouraging. What I mean by this is that all you see on social media is people traveling, making fast money, not going to college, and overall living a simple life. Seeing things like that makes you wonder if you want to buckle down and put your head in the books; or do you just want to see where life takes you.” Memorable messages transmitted by influencers do not meet all the attributes required by memorable message research; however, they are still memorable and shaping the receiver’s perception. For example, memorable messages transmitted by influencers may not have simple structure, recipients do not perceive themselves as the sole message target, and recipients do not participate in the forming of the message (Knapp, et al., 1981; Cooke-Jackson & Rubinsky, 2018). These results lend themselves to a reworking of the qualifications for memorable messages in research, at least specifically for messages transmitted by media and social media influencers.

Knowing the above information, when studying media as a communicator, a distinction must be made between memorable messages received from organizations or systems, and memorable messages received from individual people. Memorable message literature is currently generalized and has a one-size-fits-all approach without distinction between organizations and

systems, and individuals. This approach does not suffice when studying the complexities of media, specifically social media, and social media influencers. Messages received from social media and influencers must be analyzed similarly to that of an individual communicating with another individual because it is the receiver's perception that these messages are intentionally communicated, whether they are or are not. A more divisive line between memorable messages from organizations and memorable messages from people can assist in furthering this area of study. Rather than lumping them into one generalized area of study, separating them can provide a more holistic understanding of how memorable messages are perceived from based on each category.

Finally, in regards to higher education literature regarding FGCS and rural students, prior studies have established family barriers as consistently problematic when it comes to higher education interest and access (Ma, et al., 2021; Gibbons & Borders, 2010; Paterson, 2020). This study has proven that family is consistently the driving factor for encouraging higher education for students of all backgrounds. This leads to the conclusion that though families of these communities may not always provide the most lucrative informational support, the emotional support is consistent and flourishing. Therefore, it will prove beneficial to re-evaluate the barriers to higher education that these students face, potentially analyzing those barriers outside of familial support more closely.

### **Practical Implications**

This study also opens the door for several practical implications within the fields of education, higher education, and education policy. The state of Tennessee is currently ranked 33<sup>rd</sup> in education across the United states, with only 32% of the state's population being college-educated (U.S. News & World Report, 2021). Since 2014, graduation rates at Tennessee's

community colleges have increased from 14% to 25% in 2020 (TBR, 2020). While this increase is noteworthy, it shows that Tennessee has a long way to go in order to meet the goals of the ‘Drive to 55’. (Drive to 55 Alliance, 2018). Four years after the launch of TN Promise, the college-going rate of Tennesseans has declined from 64.4% to 61.8%, and fewer of the program’s participants remain on track and graduate compared with those in 2015 (Mangrum, 2021). While a decline in higher education attendance was anticipated, particularly due to the coronavirus pandemic, the state predicts the number of Tennesseans actually earning degrees or credentials will slow following 2022 (Mangrum, 2021). This stagnation in higher education completion must be systematically addressed if the state still aims to fulfill the goals of the ‘Drive to 55’.

First, at no point in this study were high school institutions or colleges/universities reported as being the most, or even the second most, influential to encourage higher education. This is problematic, especially when considering that students spend upwards of twelve years of their adolescence consistently enrolled in an education institution, learning from would-be role models and mentors who have received a college degree. Gonzales and Ebert (2018) established that 70% of Tennessee students who get to community college need remedial work upon their arrival (Para. 9). Better all -round preparation, messaging, and mentorship in K-12 is crucial to long-term success. One student said, “My sociology teacher in high school told his class not to waste money on higher education because we would end up in debt for the rest of our lives and our degree would mean nothing when companies are still hiring and paying people with high school diplomas the same amount.” This kind of negative messaging from mentors in the field of education contradict the messaging promoted by the state and sew doubt about attending college for those students who are unsure. Similarly, another student said, “The college and career

counselors at my high school encouraged college for everyone. At times it seemed like all my high school did was mention college. They held a college fair and everything.” While it is important to empower students with knowledge about college and college-readiness, this progress and encouragement falls short if students are unprepared for the curriculum once they arrive. Finally, another student said, “My school did not really prepare for school they just expected us to know things we didn’t also my school barely explained anything about college to us.” This lack of preparedness and expectation to understand without prior knowledge was an idea featured in numerous responses throughout this study. The state as a whole must make a concerted effort to align messaging regarding higher education transmitted by educators, and they must equip educators through curriculum policy to better prepare Tennessee students for success outside of the K-12 system.

Consistently throughout this study, messages regarding finances were the most prominent concern for Tennessee students, whether that be finances through a positive lens or finances through a negative lens. Though the TN Promise allows students to access free higher education for two years, it does not alleviate the financial concerns these students face. As mentioned previously, 35 of the 95 counties in the state of Tennessee are rural communities at-risk of becoming economically distressed or are economically distressed (tnAchieves, 2021). These students are of low socioeconomic status more often than not, and face financial barriers, even when receiving a free education. The cost of textbooks, supplies, transportation, and fees are still present, even with the funding provided by the TN Promise. Mangrum (2021) reported several changes to the TN Promise that were previously advised to lawmakers to help alleviate financial concerns: changing the community service requirement for students to be eligible for the scholarship or giving students the opportunity to complete the requirement during the school day,

adjusting the number of credits students are required to take each semester to maintain the scholarship to allow students to attend part-time, and increase funding for non-mandatory textbooks and school supplies (Para. 16-17). Requiring outside of school community service, requiring students to attend full-time, and providing limited funding for supplies all impact a student's finances and hinder a student's ability to fulfill the commitment of the TN Promise. Lawmakers should reconsider the stipulations of the TN Promise to be more inclusive of those students who continue to face economic barriers while enrolled in the program.

However, it is important to note that there is something to be said for investing in your education, versus not investing in your education. By requiring students to complete community service requirements, fund supplies and transportation, and commit to their education full-time, students are forced to invest in themselves and be primary stakeholders in their education. Though this investment can be a financial hinderance, it does require one to commit to themselves and the investment they have made in their education, thus encouraging retention and furthermore, graduation. By eliminating the above requirements from the TN Promise, students no longer have a stake in their education without having a financial investment in the higher education process. This could lead to lower retention and graduation rates, potentially further negatively impacting the state's education rates.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The first limitation that must be brought to attention regarding this study was the lack of reliability for the CICS measure. Though additional reliability testing proved that two factors within the CICS were reliable, all additional factors were unable to be used and analyzed. This proved to be highly disappointing for the study, and resulted in a very limited understanding of college choice factors for these student populations. Future researchers seeking to replicate or



advance this study should utilize a different measure to analyze college choice factors, or conduct reliability testing for specific questions within each factor of the scale.

The second limitation that must be addressed is the lack of equitable ethnicity representation across students within this study. It is crucial to note that an overwhelming majority of students participating in this study reported being white. Though Tennessee is a predominately white state in regards to ethnicity, this is a cause for concern when looking to gather diverse perspectives regarding VAS, memorable messages, and higher education. One must assume that the results of this study pertain specifically to those students who identify as white, rather than white students and students of color. Future researchers seeking to advance the results of this study should make a concerted effort to gather participants from diverse backgrounds to gather a broader scope of knowledge for a variety of student types.

Future researchers should also reconsider the role media plays, specifically in VAS and memorable messages. Media being ranked as the second most influential source factor to discourage interest in higher education came as a quite the surprise, with no way to anticipate this result through studying prior literature. In addition, the consistent mention of social media and influencers throughout the individual responses reported provides an opportunity for future scholars to study of the consistency and repetitiveness of the way VAS and memorable messages are communicated and portrayed across social media platforms, and the potential its consumption has to impact a student's VAS and higher education choices.

## **Conclusion**

This study analyzed college-aged students in the state of Tennessee, with specific focus placed on FGCS and rural students, who participate in the TN Promise. This study examined literature and prior studies in VAS, memorable messages, and higher education. Students

participating in this study were asked to complete a survey regarding VAS and the memorable messages received from their most influential source factor regarding higher education. The results of this survey found that students report family as their most influential source to encourage higher education, peers as their most influential source to discourage higher education, and numerous encouraging and discouraging messages regarding everything from financial success to education inequity. This study suggests the numerous research opportunities have the potential to follow this project, including a diversification of participants and a reanalysis in the role media plays in VAS and memorable messages.

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## APPENDIX

*Survey.*

### Consent for Research Participation

**Research Study Title:** An exploration of rural and first-generation college students' memorable messages about higher education

**Researchers:** Margaret Keene, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Emily Paskewitz, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

#### **Why am I being asked to be in this research study?**

We are asking you to be in this research study because you are a Tennessee student currently enrolled in a higher education institution that participates in the Tennessee Promise through tnAchieves.

#### **What is this research study about?**

The purpose of this research study is to collect information to provide an understanding for why rural, first generation college students choose to attend an institution of higher education, and the messages they receive to inform that decision.

#### **Who is conducting this research study?**

This study is being conducted by researchers at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville with the assistance of tnAchieves.

#### **How long will I be in the research study?**

This survey can take up to 30 minutes to complete.

#### **What will happen if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research study”?**

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to take a survey lasting up to 30 minutes regarding your memorable message sources and your interest in higher education.

**What happens if I say “No, I do not want to be in this research study”?**

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won't affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

**What happens if I say “Yes” but change my mind later?**

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time. If you decide to stop before the study is completed, exit the survey and close your browser window.

Survey responses that were collected prior to quitting the survey cannot be withdrawn as data are de-identified and code key destroyed after an anonymous survey is submitted.

**Are there any possible risks to me?**

We don't know of any risks to you from being in the study.

**Are there any benefits to being in this research study?**

We do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about Tennessee students participating in tnAchieves. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

**Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?**

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by de-identifying and code key destroying data from the anonymous survey. If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.

- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.
- Graham Thomas, Director of Community Partnerships with tnAchieves who is assisting with the facilitation of this research.

**What will happen to my information after this study is over?**

We will keep your information to use for future research. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from your research data collected as part of the study. We will not share your research data with other researchers.

**Will I be paid for being in this research study?**

Survey participants will have the option of entering into a drawing for one of five individual \$10 gift cards. Participation in the study is not necessary for entry into the drawing. Tennessee gaming law requires that any individual be allowed to participate in the drawing even if that individual does not participate in the research. Anyone age 18 and over may enter the drawing even if they do not participate in the research. At the conclusion of the survey, there will be a separate link to access a form to enter the drawing. This form will require that participants be 18 or older, and must include their email address. Information from this form will be kept separate from survey responses.

**Will it cost me anything to be in this research study?**

It will not cost you anything to be in this study.

**Who can answer my questions about this research study?**

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers, Margaret Keene at [mkeene1@utk.edu](mailto:mkeene1@utk.edu) or 865-974-0454; Emily Paskewitz at [epaskewi@utk.edu](mailto:epaskewi@utk.edu) or 865-974-0696.

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

1534 White Avenue

Blount Hall, Room 408

Knoxville, TN 37996-1529

Phone: 865-974-7697

Email: [utkirb@utk.edu](mailto:utkirb@utk.edu)

### **Statement of Consent**

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By proceeding into this survey, I am consenting to be in this study. I understand that I can request a copy of this document by contacting the researchers.

### **Survey**

- Demographic Questions
  - What is your age? (fill in the blank)
  - What is your sex? (multiple choice)
    - Male

- Female
- Unnamed (fill in the blank)
- Are you Hispanic or Latino/a/x?
  - Yes
  - No
- Regardless of your answer to the prior questions, please indicate how you identify yourself. You may select one or more. (multiple answer)
  - Native American or Alaska Native
  - Asian
  - Black or African American
  - Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific
  - White
  - Unnamed (fill in the blank)
- What is your average, annual household income? (multiple choice)
  - \$32,048 or less
  - \$32,049 – \$53,413
  - \$53,414 - \$106,827
  - \$106,828 - \$373,894
  - \$373,985 or more
- What type of higher education institution do you attend? (multiple choice)
  - 2-year institution
  - 4-year institution
  - Trade School

- Unnamed (fill in the blank)
- What is your current major? (fill in the blank)
- Why did you select your current major? (short answer)
- Were you expected to pursue higher education after high school by attending a college or university? (if yes, additional question)
  - Yes
  - No
- If yes, please explain the expectation for you to attend a college or university. Who communicated this expectation? What was communicated regarding this expectation? (short answer)
- Are you a first-generation college student? A first-generation college student is defined as college student whose parents or guardians did not attend college or attain an advanced degree. (multiple choice)
  - Yes
  - No
- In which Tennessee county is your hometown located? (fill in the blank)
- How would you define your hometown? (multiple choice)
  - Rural – population of less than 2,500 people
  - Suburban – population between 2,500 and 50,000 people
  - Urban – population more than 50,000 people
- Vocational Anticipatory Socialization Questions
  - Did someone encourage your interest in higher education? (multiple choice)
    - Yes



- No one encouraged my interest in higher education.
- Which category do you perceive as the most influential in encouraging your interest in higher education? (rank order)
  - Family – parents, guardians, siblings, grandparents, etc.
  - Peers/Friends – friends, classmates, teammates, etc.
  - Part-time jobs and Co-ops/Internships
  - Media – television, movies, social media, magazines, etc.
  - High School Institutions – schools, teachers/educators, counselors, etc.
  - College/Universities – admissions counselors, tours, emails, etc.
- Think back to the previous response where you indicated which category was most influential in encouraging your interest in higher education. What messages did your most influential category communicate, or what things did they say, to encourage your interest in higher education? (short answer)
- Did someone discourage your interest in higher education? (multiple choice)
  - Yes
  - No one discouraged my interest in higher education.
- Which category do you perceive as the most influential in discouraging your interest in higher education? (rank order)
  - Family – parents, guardians, siblings, grandparents, etc.
  - Peers/Friends – friends, classmates, teammates, etc.
  - Part-time jobs and Co-ops/Internships
  - Media – television, movies, social media, magazines, etc.
  - High School Institutions – schools, teachers/educators, counselors, etc.

- College/Universities – admissions counselors, tours, emails, etc.
  - Think back to your previous response where you indicated which category was most influential in discouraging your interest in higher education. What messages did your most influential category communicate, or what things did they say, to discourage your interest in higher education? (short answer)
- Higher Education Choice Questions
  - Think about your decision to go to college, and your particular college choice. Mark each statement according to how much you agree or disagree with it. Do not skip any items. Answer each item according to which best describes your feelings about the statement: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and disagree strongly.
    - Factor 1 – *Attitudes Toward the Specified Institution*
      1. I have made a number of friends since I have been in college.
      2. My decision to go to college was completely my own idea.
      3. I came to my college because it has a friendly reputation.
      4. My college has a great reputation for my field of study.
      5. If I could go to school anywhere, I would still go to my college.
      6. My college is a very impressive institution in general.
      7. I chose my college for the overall campus life experience.
    - Factor 2 – *Life Planning Influence on Attendance*
      1. I am comfortable with my major field of study.
      2. I am going to college while I figure out what I really want to do with my life.

3. I came to college because my friends did.
  4. I decided to go to college to prove to myself that I was smart enough to pass.
  5. I plan to stay in college until I graduate.
- Factor 3 – *Others' Influence on Attendance*
1. My parents want me to go to college.
  2. Most of my high school friends go to college.
  3. In my family, going to college is encouraged.
  4. I always knew that I would go to college.
  5. People in my family usually do not go to college.
- Factor 4 – *Independence/Recreational Reasons for Attendance*
1. I am attending college to get away from my hometown.
  2. I am going to school to party.
  3. I came to college to get away from my family.
  4. I like my college because it is a party school.
  5. I came to my college because a specific recreational activity is nearby.
- Factor 5 – *Family Tradition of Attendance at the Specified Institution*
1. Going to my college is considered a tradition in my family.
  2. Other members of my immediate family attend or have attended my college.
  3. At least one of my parents attended my college.

*Acronyms.*

Acronyms are listed in order of appearance within the study.

- VAS – Vocational Anticipatory Socialization
- FGCS – First-Generation College Student
- TN Promise – Tennessee Promise
- TCAT – Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology
- AGI – Adjusted Gross Income
- EFC – Expected Family Contribution
- NCES – National Center for Education Statistics

## VITA

A native Tennessean, Margaret “Maggie” Keene, grew up in Greeneville, Tennessee, a small, rural town in northeast Tennessee. After high school, she attended the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and received a Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies. Before graduating with her undergraduate degree, she knew she wanted to work in higher education and pursue graduate school. She chose to further her education at her alma mater and pursue a Master’s of Science degree in Communication Studies with a concentration in Organizational Communication. Her research interest includes Vocational Anticipatory Socialization (VAS), memorable messages, and higher education, with a specific interest in first-generation and rural students. After graduation, she will continue her role in higher education recruitment for the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She is beyond grateful for the support received from her parents, partner, family, friends, advisor, and mentor throughout this long journey. She hopes to pursue a Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.