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ACADEMIC MATCH AND THE TENNESSEE PROMISE: HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS' PERSPECTIVES
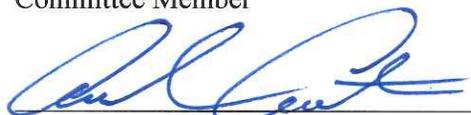
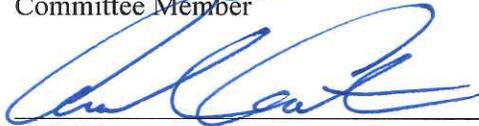This is to certify that I have examined this copy of the doctoral dissertation by

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**ACADEMIC MATCH AND THE TENNESSEE PROMISE: RURAL HIGH
SCHOOL COUNSELORS' PERSPECTIVES**

Dissertation

**Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education
in the Carter and Moyers School of Education
at Lincoln Memorial University**

by

Charles A. Painter

October 2019

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my father who was unable to finish school but worked tirelessly to provide for his family and instill a tough work ethic that enabled me to see this project through to its end.

I also dedicate this work to my three sons who are the reasons I do all that I do.

I had a special friend who shared the dissertation journey with me and gave moral support when I lacked faith in myself. Thanks, Laura.

In all things I do, I always ask God's guidance. This project was no different. He has always been a constant source of strength. I plan to use what I have gained from this journey to do what He asks of me wherever He sends me.

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I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee,

Dr. Andrew Courtner and Dr. Clifford Davis, for their insights and feedback. I

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Gaines, for her tireless enthusiasm and guidance throughout this dissertation

process. Without their help this project could not have occurred.

Abstract

The number of Tennessee students increasingly enrolled in postsecondary

institutions since the introduction of Tennessee Promise (TN Promise); however,

program requirements coupled with counselor behaviors related to TN Promise

may lead to academic undermatch. This researcher used a qualitative research

design to investigate the responses of high school guidance counselors in rural

school districts in East Tennessee. Eight high school counselors participated in

the study. Data analysis revealed that high school counselors encourage all

eligible students to enroll in TN Promise without considering academic match.

High school counselors used implicit actions and activities to enroll students in

TN Promise. High school counselors view TN Promise as a back-up plan for

students even when students indicate they are not interested in applying.

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Chapter I: Introduction

According to the U.S. Department of Labor's (2018) Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2017 an estimated 133,780 school counselors worked in elementary and secondary schools in the United States. High school counselors served as bridges for information that helped high school students plan for the future and make postsecondary decisions, including whether to continue their education or enter the work force. Belasco and Trivette (2015) indicated that high school students' visiting a high school counselor was one factor that led to a lower likelihood of college undermatch. Researchers, counselors, and educators should understand how high school counselors influenced the decisions high school students made to inform better practices that ensured brighter futures for children.

Statement of the Problem

Researchers agreed that high school counselors impact high school students' college-going decisions (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; McDonough, 2005; Rapp, 2005). Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, and Holcomb-McCoy (2011) found, "Student-counselor contact for college information is a significant positive predictor of applying to college" (p. 195). Belasco (2013) stated, "My analysis revealed school-based counseling as making a distinct and substantial contribution to the college enrollment and destination of low-SES populations especially" (p. 797). Fitzpatrick and Schneider (2016) stated there is a 50% increase in likelihood of Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) submission among high school students who met with a high school counselor at least once per year.

Research highlighted the importance of academic match for students considering completing college (Light & Strayer, 2000; Smith, Pender, Howell, & Hurwitz, 2012; Wyner, Bridgeland, & Dilulio, 2007). Smith et al. (2012) defined academic undermatch as a "student's academic credentials [that] permit them access to a college or university that is more selective than the postsecondary alternative they actually choose" (p. 2). Wyner et al. (2007) found that students who undermatch take longer to finish a degree and are less likely to graduate. Similarly, Rodriguez (2015) argued, "Failing to broaden access for students at matched institutions is an inefficient way to cultivate the nation's human capital" (p. 567).

Smith et al. (2012) concluded, "It is readily apparent that most students undermatch because they do not apply to a college that matches their academic credentials (p. 8). McDonough (2005) stated that high school counselors:

. . . create and implement the school's normative expectations for students' college destination and how to prepare for them. . . . Schools and counselors construct this worldview in response to their perceptions of the parents' and community's expectations for appropriate college destinations, combined with the counselor's own knowledge and experience base. (p. 22)

In 2014 the state of Tennessee initiated the Tennessee Promise (TN Promise) as a last-dollar scholarship-mentor program (Littlepage, Clark, Wilson, & Stout, 2018). The Tennessee Achieves (tnAchieves) Student Handbook: Class of 2018 (tnAchieves, n.d.) defined last-dollar scholarship as paying for all tuition

and mandatory fees not met by federal and state funds. tnAchieves (n.d.) further stipulated that TN Promise funds may be applied to certain 4-year institutions that offer an associate's degree program but may not be applied to a bachelor's program. Pierce (2015) reported that 90% of the state's high school seniors enrolled in TN Promise in 2015. The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) (n.d.) reported that 60,615 students graduated in 2014; 61,442 students graduated in 2015; and 63,194 students graduated in 2016, and, of these students, rates of application to postsecondary institutions were 58%, 64%, and 63% respectively. The TDOE (n.d.) reported a decrease of between 2-3% in enrollment at 4-year universities and an increase of between 5-8% for enrollment at 2-year colleges between 2014 and 2016.

Belasco and Trivette (2015) reported in a nationally representative study of students with access to 4-year universities that rural students were between 61-67% more likely to undermatch depending on the selectivity level of the institution to which they applied. Roehrich-Patrick, Moreo, and Gibson (2016) related that, by applying the U.S. Census Bureau's definition of rurality, in 2010 nearly 70 of the 95 Tennessee counties were more than 50% rural. Combined, the data from these two sources indicated that over half the students in nearly 73% of Tennessee counties could be affected by undermatch because they were from rural school districts.

Tennessee students are increasingly enrolling in postsecondary institutions since the introduction of TN Promise. Program requirements, however, coupled with counselor behaviors related to TN Promise may lead to academic

undermatch. The purpose of this study was to determine if high school counselors

encouraged students to apply for TN Promise without regard to student academic

match.

Research Questions

Research questions serve as a guide for the research and reflect the most

significant factors to study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher relied on

the research questions to guide the study and to determine how data were to be

collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Research question 1. What criteria, if any, do high school counselors use

to determine a student's match for TN Promise in rural school districts in

Tennessee?

Research question 2. What trend of after high-school plans occurred

before and after implementation of TN Promise in rural school districts in

Tennessee?

Theoretical Framework

The researcher used the theory of social capital to examine the interactions

between high school counselors and students in rural East Tennessee school

districts. There have been many contributors to the discussion of social capital as

a theory. Coleman (1988) built on the theory of rational action and defined social

capital as a resource within rational action that depended upon trustworthiness of

the social environment and the extent of obligations held between individuals in a

social network. Lin (1999) explained the premise of social capital as "investment

in social relations with expected return" (p. 30). Lin (2001) further defined social

capital as resources embedded in social networks that individuals may access and use. Both Coleman (1988) and Lin (2001) agreed that social capital holds value for its possessor. Coleman (1988) asserted:

> By identifying [the] function of certain aspects of social structure, the concept of social capital constitutes both an aid in accounting for different outcomes at the level of individual actors and an aid toward making the micro-to-macro transitions without elaborating the social structural details through which this occurs. (p. 101)

As such, this researcher asserted that high school counselors act as a resource of information that enables students to make appropriate college-going decisions regarding the appropriateness of certain postsecondary funding programs including TN Promise. Acting in such capacity, high school counselors were a form of social capital for students.

Significance of the Project

The researcher chose school districts in East Tennessee for this study. Each district had to be rural, participate in TN Promise, and employ certified high school counselors. The districts considered in this study represented a range of rurality and offered an opportunity to understand differences in counselor responses across varying measures of rurality.

When research for this study was conducted, there were limited data available concerning the impact of high school counselors on student postsecondary decision making and how TN Promise guidelines coupled with high school counselor practices may, or may not, lead to academic undermatch of

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students in rural schools. The researcher anticipated enlarging the research and literature bases surrounding TN Promise in general and outcomes related to high school counselor and student interaction regarding TN Promise specifically. The researcher further hoped to provide information that might inform future education policy involving TN Promise and provide direction for high school counselor interactions with students regarding TN Promise and postsecondary decisions. Better quality and more frequent interaction between high school counselors and students enable students to make more informed and better college-going choices. Additionally, the researcher hoped that, if high school counselors were encouraging students to enroll in TN Promise without regard to the appropriateness of the match between the student and the institution, this research might result in better practices to reduce the likelihood of academic undermatch and enable students to attend the institutions that were the best fit for the students whether they chose to use the TN Promise scholarship or not.

Description of the Terms

Creswell (2014) indicated that "a term may require a definition to help the reader understand the research problem and questions or hypotheses in the study" (p. 44). The researcher included terms in this section that required clarification and to define the meaning as the researcher intended the term to be used within the parameters of this study (Creswell, 2014).

Academic match. According to Smith et al. (2012), academic match was based on college selectivity, students' academic ability, and other student needs and occurred when a student was matched to a college based on the student's

qualifications and the level of institutional selectivity. Because the researcher was not interested in determining actual match but if any criteria were used by school counselors to determine a student's match for TN Promise, the researcher did not measure academic match.

 High school counselors. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) (2019) defined school counselors as educators with a minimum of a master's degree in school counseling who meet state licensure standards and may be employed in a variety of positions and school types including high school. The researcher was interested in school counselors who were employed in high schools and provided counseling services to high school students.

 Rural school. According to Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder, and Fields (2016), the U.S. Census Bureau defined rural as any area that is not urban and defined urban as areas with a population of at least 50,000 or urban clusters with a population of between 2,500 and 50,000. Rural, then, included all areas not within these confines; a rural school was one located in an area outside urban areas or urban clusters. Because rural school districts have elementary schools with students that attend larger high schools located in urban areas or urban clusters within the same district, these high schools were considered rural for the purposes of this study.

 Social capital. Lin (2001) defined social capital as resources embedded in social networks that individuals may access and use. For the purposes of this study, the researcher defined social capital as the resources, including

information, that arise as a result of the relationship between high school counselors and the students with whom they work.

Tennessee Promise. TN Promise is a last-dollar scholarship-mentor program (Littlepage et al., 2018). The tnAchieves Student Handbook: Class of 2018 (tnAchieves, n.d.) defined last-dollar scholarship as paying for all tuition and mandatory fees not met by federal and state funds. tnAchieves (n.d.) further stipulated that TN Promise funds may be applied to certain 4-year institutions that offer an associate's degree program but may not be applied to a bachelor's program.

Undermatch. Smith et al. (2012) defined academic undermatch as a "student's academic credentials [that] permit them access to a college or university that is more selective than the postsecondary alternative they actually choose" (p. 2).

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

In response to rising costs of postsecondary education and demands for more skilled workers in technical fields and other areas of the workforce, states and the federal government have begun considering modes of funding higher education. Goldrick-Rab (2016) reported exorbitant costs associated with attending postsecondary institutions. Schneider (2010) reported that between 2003-2008 state subsidies combined with state and federal grants totaled over nine billion dollars for students in their first year of college. One alternative for producing funding for postsecondary education was to use monies generated from state-run lotteries, also known as lottery-based financial aid.

Background of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship

In 2015 students in Tennessee were able to attend postsecondary institutions through TN Promise, Tennessee's lottery-based scholarship (Littlepage et al., 2018; Pierce, 2015). Authors reported a history of political and social changes that led to the 2015 scholarship program in Tennessee (Littlepage et al., 2018; Ness, 2010; Ness & Mistretta, 2009; Pierce, 2015; Smith & Bowyer, 2016). Ness (2010) indicated that lottery legislation in Tennessee had been introduced as early as 1984 but did not gain acceptance until 2002. In November 2003, a referendum was passed in Tennessee that removed the state constitutional ban on lotteries (Ness, 2010). The Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship (TELS) was initiated in 2003; lottery funds provided financial assistance to high school graduates based on both merit and need (Finney et al., 2017; Smith & Bowyer, 2016).

The TELS program funds grants, scholarships, and initiatives including

Tennessee Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally (HOPE), General Assembly

Merit Scholarship, Aspire, HOPE Access Grant, Wilder-Naifeh Grant, HOPE

Foster Care Grant, Dual Enrollment Grant, Tennessee Reconnect, and TN

Promise and reported funding of more than $355 million to 132,026 students in

the 2017-2018 school year alone (Tennessee Higher Education Commission

[THEC], n.d.). The THEC stated in its TELS Program annual report for 2017 that

the HOPE Scholarship was the most common award type with nearly $925

million provided to students between 2012 and 2018 (THEC, n.d.). Penn (2007)

reported that the amount for the HOPE Scholarship is determined by the

Tennessee legislature each year as part of its annual budget appropriations.

Researchers reported fluctuations in the dollar amount for the award over the

years since its creation (Bruce & Carruthers, 2014; Penn, 2007; THEC, n.d.).

THEC (n.d.) indicated that the HOPE base since 2015 is $3,500 for freshmen and

sophomores and $4,500 for juniors and seniors enrolled at 4-year universities, and

$3,000 for students enrolled full-time at 2-year community colleges.

Pierce (2015) stated, "The Tennessee Promise grew out of a privately

funded effort called tnAchieves, which began in Knox County [Tennessee] . . ."

(pp. 41-42). Littlepage et al. (2018) reported that tnAchieves grew from a local,

nonprofit, last-dollar scholarship program in Knoxville, Tennessee, known as

knoxAchieves, which began in 2008 and provided financial support to Knox

County, Tennessee, students to attend Pellissippi State Community College.

According to researchers, knoxAchieves soon expanded to include other counties

and postsecondary institutions in the state after one of its founding partners, Bill Haslam, became governor of the state (Littlepage et al., 2018; Millet, 2017).

Researchers pointed to Governor Bill Haslam's 2013 Drive to 55 campaign as the overarching initiative that encompassed Tennessee's agenda for postsecondary attainment (Finney et al., 2017; Littlepage et al., 2018; TDOE, n.d.). According to TDOE (n.d.):

> The Drive to 55 mission [is] to increase the number of Tennesseans with a postsecondary degree or certificate to 55 percent by 2025. To support this work, the Tennessee Department of Education set forth ambitious but attainable goals in its strategic plan, Tennessee Succeeds. The plan calls upon the department to support the work of Tennessee's districts in increasing the average ACT composite score to 21 by 2020 and in equipping the majority of high school graduates from the class of 2020 to earn a postsecondary certificate, diploma, or degree. The Tennessee Department of Education is one of the first K-12 education agencies in the United States to develop a statewide goal for postsecondary attainment.
>
> (p. 1)

Littlepage et al. (2018) stated, "TN Promise is the legislative initiative supporting the campaign" (p. 381).

Recipients of TN Promise were required to be Tennessee state residents and maintain a minimum 2.0 grade point average (GPA) in their postsecondary studies to continue to receive benefits (Smith & Bowyer, 2016); however, students who graduated from high school or homeschool and those who have a general education diploma may receive funding (Smith & Bowyer, 2016).

Further, Smith and Bowyer (2016) stated there was no minimum high school grade requirement to begin receiving TN Promise funds. Researchers reported that the TN Promise scholarship required candidates to maintain only a 2.0 cumulative GPA, was available for the first two years of postsecondary education, and could be applied only to an associate's degree or certification from a technical or vocational school (Littlepage et al., 2018; Smith & Bowyer, 2016; tnAchieves, n.d.). TN Promise recipients may attend any of Tennessee's 13 community colleges, 27 colleges of applied technology, or a 4-year university offering an eligible associate's degree program (Millet, 2017).

According to Peirce (2015), former United States President Barack Obama hoped to enact federal legislation that would create a federal funding source for postsecondary education similar to that in Tennessee. Pierce (2015) reported that states were not waiting on the federal government to initiate federal funding and that, as of 2015, eight states were considering postsecondary funding legislation. Detractors warned against making too much change in community college funding until more was known about long term outcomes from TN Promise (Pierce, 2015). Pierce (2015), when discussing the use of TN Promise as a model in other states, stated, "Critics have pointed out that Tennessee Promise is unproven, and until it shows results, lawmakers shouldn't try to duplicate it on a national scale" (p. 40).

Smith and Bowyer (2016) reported that the two Tennessee 2-year community colleges they investigated developed new processes for information dissemination, initiated advertising campaigns, developed community outreach programs, and hired additional staff in response to TN Promise. The two colleges

in the study by Smith and Bowyer (2016) made transformational changes in anticipation of the needs that would arise because of TN Promise.

Regarding TN Promise, Smith and Bowyer (2016) reported:

The obvious outcomes are increases in the enrollment of recent high school graduates, first-time degree-seeking students, and first-time full-time students. Less obvious outcomes are the relationships built between the high schools, the college, and the community; the increased support for postsecondary education, and the change in the conversation regarding the value of a postsecondary credential and the community college. (p. 188)

Impact of Tuition Free College

Hiestand (2018) reported that "over 200 College Promise programs in 43 states have become increasingly popular policy proposals at the state and local levels" (p. 1). Tuition-free programs vary in award amounts, qualifications, and geographical reach across the United States (Kelchen, 2017; National Association of Student Financial Aid Administration [NASFAA], 2017; Perna & Leigh, 2018). Programs such as the Milwaukee Area Technical College Promise, the Michigan Promise Zones (Grigos, 2016; NASFAA, 2017), and the Kalamazoo Promise (Grigos, 2016; Kelchen, 2017) targeted smaller areas within a state and were wholly or in part privately funded. Other programs such as Georgia's HOPE Scholarship (Cornwell, Lee, & Mustard, 2005; Goetz, Mimura, Desai, & Cude, 2008; Long, 2004; Ness, 2010; Zhang, 2011), the Indiana 21st Century Scholars program (Kelchen, 2017; NASFAA, 2017; St. John, Musoba, & Simmons, 2003; Toutkoushian, Hossler, DesJardins, McCall, & Canche, 2015), the Oklahoma

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Promise (Mendoza & Mendez, 2012; NASFAA, 2017), and the Oregon Promise (Cannon & Joyalle, 2016; NASFAA, 2017) provided financial aid to students across an entire state and are state funded. Other characteristics of tuition-free programs were that funding may be *first dollar*, allowing funds to be applied to tuition before other state, federal, and institutional grants and scholarships, and others are *last dollar* and can only be applied to tuition after all other funding sources have been applied (Cannon & Joyalle, 2016; Kelchen, 2017; NASFAA, 2017; Perna & Leigh, 2018). Hiestand (2018) stated, "While models and funding structures vary, the objective of each of these programs is to increase access to higher education, reduce costs, and improve retention and completion rates" (p. 1). Perna and Leigh (2018) reviewed information pertaining to 289 promise programs and found the following:

> 97% of all state-sponsored programs in the analyses define place as residing in a state, compared with 12% of all non-state sponsored programs. Of the non-state sponsored programs, 23% target a county, 24% a school district, 12% a state, 12% a college service district, and 11% a city . . . Most state-sponsored programs require recipients to reside in the state for one year (78% compared with 8% of non-state sponsored programs) . . . More than half (57%) of non-state sponsored programs offer a financial aid award to attend a two-year college only, compared with only 11% of state-sponsored programs. Most (80%) state-sponsored programs permit attendance at a two-year or four-year institution, compared with 30% of non-state sponsored programs. (p. 159)

The state of Indiana's Twenty-First Century Scholars (TFCS) Program is a last dollar, state funded program that began in 1989 and provides aid to low-income students who meet requirements and can be used at any participating public college or university in Indiana (NAFSAA, 2017; St. John et al., 2003; Toutkoushian, 2015). According to St. John et al. (2003), students must commit to the TFCS by eighth grade, graduate from an Indiana high school with at least a 2.0 cumulative GPA, apply for admission at an Indiana postsecondary institution, apply for federal and state financial aid, and be a good citizen with no history of illegal drug use or crime. Kelchen (2017) reported changes in the TFCS eligibility requirements as of 2013 which include completion of a 12-step Scholar Success Program, graduate high school with a college-preparatory diploma, and have a 2.5 cumulative GPA at graduation.

St. John et al. (2003) used data from the Indiana Commission for Higher Education's Student Information System for the 1998-1999 academic year to investigate the impact of TFCS on 5,433 college freshmen and 3,469 college sophomores. The researchers determined that rates of within-year persistence, meaning the amount of time a student was enrolled from the beginning to the end of a given academic school year, were the same for TFCS recipients and those who did not receive TFCS funds. Toutkoushian et al. (2015) used data from a statewide survey conducted in 1999-2000 of 42,227 9th grade students in the State of Indiana to examine the impact of TFCS on postsecondary enrollment behaviors among TFCS aid recipients. Toutkoushian et al. (2015) determined that TFCS participants were 2.4% more likely to enroll at 2-year in-state public institutions and 4.2% more likely to enroll at 4-year in-state public institutions

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than non-TFCS participants. Toutkoushian et al. (2015) also reported that TFCS

participants were more likely to choose in-state institutions that accepted the

TFCS grant. Toutkoushian et al. (2015) stated, "The program appears to have a

modest impact on both access and choice for lower-income students in the state"

(p. 85).

The Oklahoma Promise, initiated in 1991, has been shown to increase

persistence among students (Mendoza & Mendez, 2012). According to Mendoza

and Mendez (2012), students who received the Oregon Promise grant were

2.5-5.9 times more likely to transition from freshman to sophomore in one year,

depending on the financial aid package, than students who did not receive the

Oregon Promise. Sophomores were 2.4-2.8 times more likely than non-Oregon

Promise recipients to transition to juniors in one year, but Oregon Promise

recipients who were juniors were 60-80% less likely to transition to seniors

(Mendoza & Mendez, 2012).

The state of Georgia implemented the HOPE Scholarship, funded through

the state's lottery, in 1993 (Cornwell et al., 2005; Goetz et al., 2008; Ness, 2010;

Zhang, 2011). To qualify for the Georgia HOPE Scholarship, students must have

graduated from high school with at least a *B* average, maintained a 3.0 cumulative

GPA throughout the use of the program, and have been a resident of Georgia

(Cornwell et al., 2005; Goetz et al., 2008). Georgia HOPE scholarship recipients

were eligible for funding through the program until they reached either

completion of a bachelor's degree or 127 attempted semester hours (Goetz et al.,

2008), and the scholarship applied to any Georgia public postsecondary institution

(Cornwell et al., 2005).

Zhang (2011) reported increases in baccalaureate degrees in both Georgia and Florida after the implementation of tuition-free programs in those states. Cornwell, Mustard, and Sridhar (2006) investigated enrollment effects of Georgia HOPE on recipients between 1993 and 1997 and determined a 5.9% increase in enrollment as compared to other member states of the Southern Regional Education Board. Cornwell et al. (2006) examined data for 356,454 HOPE Scholarship recipients and reported, "4-year public and private schools together enrolled over 80% of HOPE Scholars, receiving almost 90% of all merit-based aid" (p. 765). Of those students who received the HOPE Scholarship, 56,829 (15.9%) enrolled in public 2-year colleges. Overall, the number of students who qualified for Georgia HOPE increased from 1993 (48%) to 1997 (65%), and enrollment by high school graduates who were eligible for HOPE rose from 23% to 70% (Cornwell et al., 2006).

Researchers expressed concerns about the impact of some outcomes related to the Georgia HOPE Scholarship (Cornwell et al., 2005; Goetz et al., 2008; Zhang, 2011). Cornwell et al. (2005) considered data for nearly 33,000 first-time freshmen at the University of Georgia between 1989 and 1997 and determined that receipt of the HOPE Scholarship was related to a 9.3% lower probability in the number of students who enrolled in and completed full coarse loads. Cornwell et al. (2005) further related that over that same time period 3,100 fewer courses were completed by freshmen than would have been completed in the absence of the Georgia HOPE Scholarship.

Long (2004) used data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System from 1989 through 1997 and data from the Georgia Student Finance

Commission to investigate how the implementation of the Georgia HOPE

Scholarship affected institutions of higher education themselves. Long (2004)

compared 18 Georgia postsecondary institutions to 114 postsecondary institutions

in nearby states and determined that Georgia public 4-year universities raised

costs for room and board 5% faster than those in the control states and that the

increases grew over time as the number of Georgia HOPE recipients grew.

Private 4-year universities in Georgia increased tuition prices by an estimated

3.2% faster rate than those in control states, and private 4-year universities with

higher numbers of Georgia HOPE recipients reduced institutional aid, such as

scholarships, grants, etc. awarded by the institution by 19.4% as compared to

schools in control states (Long, 2004).

Cannon and Joyalle (2016) reviewed the relatively new Oregon Promise,

implemented in 2015, and reported that FAFSA filing increased by 11.4% in

Oregon the first year following the implementation of the program. Cannon and

Joyalle (2016) reported that affluent students benefitted more than low-income

students from the Oregon Promise. The application process for Oregon Promise,

according to Cannon and Joyalle (2016), has been made more complicated since

the Oregon Promise application is separate and in addition to other financial aid

applications including the FAFSA. The researchers indicated that both TN

Promise and Oregon Promise have made the application process more

complicated and recommended streamlining the process (Cannon & Joyalle,

2016).

Role of the High School Counselor

The ASCA (2019) defined school counselors as educators with a minimum of a master's degree in school counseling who met state licensure standards and could have been employed in a variety of positions and school types including high school. According to Gysbers (2004), high school counseling began in the United States in the early 1900s as vocational counseling and evolved over time. The ASCA (2019) outlined counselor delivery of services under two categories: direct services with students and indirect services for students. According to the ASCA (2019), direct services with students included school counseling core curriculum which consisted of structured guidance lessons, individual student planning in which school counselors worked with students to establish personal and academic goals, and responsive services which includes individual and small-group counseling sessions and crisis response. The ASCA (2019) described indirect services for students as those "provided on behalf of students as a result of the school counselors' interactions with others including referrals for additional assistance, consultation and collaboration with parents, teachers, other educators and community organizations" (Delivery section, para. 2).

The Tennessee State Board of Education (TSBOE) (2017) outlined the expectation of school counselors within the state in its *School Counseling Model and Standards Policy*, which described expectations and provided lists of standards for implementation of a counseling program. The TSBOE (2017) modeled its policy after the ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors and recommended that school counselors devote at least 80% of their time for direct

student services and student support services. The TSBOE (2017) required school counselors to be licensed by the TDOE and "have the training needed for fulfilling the responsibilities and specialized job assignments" (p. 3). The TSBOE (2017) further recommended a school counselor to student ratio in secondary school settings of 1:350, higher than the ASCA's (2019) recommendation of 1:250. As well as describing what school counselors should do, TSBOE (2017) stated that school counselors cannot be "the teacher of record for content courses or for the delivery of academic interventions" (p. 5). Further, TSBOE (2017) disallowed school counselors to be testing coordinators but allowed them to assist in the implementation of the testing program.

In the literature surrounding school counselors, researchers focused on the diverse roles and functions school counselors assumed within a school (Gibbons, Borders, Wiles, Stephan, & Davis, 2006; Hann-Morrison, 2011; Hines, 2002; Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, & Skelton, 2006; Wimberly & Brickman, 2014). McDonough (2005) indicated that school counselors were assigned duties such as providing mental health services to students, acting as a school disciplinarian, and scheduling in addition to college counseling. Monteiro Leitner et al. (2006) reported that principals, school counselors, and school counselors-in-training had different perceptions related to the responsibilities of counselors within a school. According to Bardhoshi and Duncan (2009), of the 538 K-12 principals of rural schools who participated in their study, 68% rated administration of cognitive, aptitude, and achievement tests as *important* or *very important*; 51% rated assisting in special education services as *important* or *very important*; and 48% rated maintaining student records as

important or *very important*. Reiner, Colbert, and Pérusse (2009) completed a study of 347 high school teachers across the United States and determined that, although teachers agreed that high school counselors should be engaged in 13 of 16 appropriate counseling tasks as outlined by the ASCA, teachers also felt counselors should be involved in 5 of 12 inappropriate responsibilities as outlined by the ASCA. Wilder and Ray (2013) examined responses from 250 parents of high school-aged students in a single school district and found that 88% of those parents preferred school counselors to provide counseling on academic issues, and "parents consistently disfavored school counselors performing administrative activities not directly related to professional school counseling" (p. 21).

Nelson, Robles-Pina, and Nichter (2008) studied responses from 475 Texas high school counselors and found that counselors preferred to complete activities related to counseling and fewer non-counseling activities. Other researchers, however, indicated that school counselors reported participating in non-counseling activities (Chandler et al., 2018; Fitch & Marshall, 2004; Stone-Johnson, 2015). Chandler et al. (2018) not only found that school counselors reported spending most of their time on non-counseling activities, but "rural school counselors had slightly more counseling duties (difference in mean of 0.04) and significantly more non-counseling duties (difference in mean of 2.2) than urban school counselors" (p. 22). Mau, Li, and Hoetmer (2016) surveyed 852 lead school counselors in public and private high schools from across the United States and found that 10% or fewer reported that non-counseling activities were a major part of their job, but all of the high school counselors reported non-counseling activities as part of their job.

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Researchers pointed to burnout as a possible outcome to the diverse, confusing expectations placed on school counselors (Camelford, Ebrahim, & Herlihy, 2017; Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011). Cervoni and DeLucia-Waack (2011) indicated decreased job satisfaction among school counselors when they are expected to complete non-counseling duties. They further stated, "The multiple demands placed on high school counselors appear to create pressure to make decisions on what services to provide or how to provide all of them with finite resources and time" (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011, p. 17). Similarly, Bardhoshi and Duncan (2009) stated, "The carrying out of these tasks can prevent school counselors from delivering essential appropriate services and advance confusion regarding the role of the school counselor" (p. 18).

According to McDonough (2005), "Within schools, no professional is more important to improving college enrollments than counselors" (p. 2). Similarly, other researchers found that meeting with a high school counselor only once per year could increase the likelihood of a student applying for financial aid by 50% (Fitzpatrick & Schneider, 2016), which some researchers linked to higher rates of persistence in postsecondary academic attainment among first-year students due to increased access to financial support (McKinney & Novak, 2012, 2014). Camizzi, Clark, Yacco, and Goodman (2009) reported the findings of a study in which high school counselors in a Florida high school held a FAFSA seminar where more than 100 low-income students applied for financial aid. Camizzi et al. (2009) stated, "By enabling and encouraging families to apply for government financial aid as well as locally funded scholarships through community outreach, school counselors are helping low-income students access

the necessary funding for higher education, thus making it a reality for

first-generation college students" (p. 477). Similarly, Fitzpatrick and Schneider

(2016) stated, "Counseling activities matter much more for disadvantaged

students" (p. 4).

Bryan et al. (2011) looked at a nationally representative sample of 4,835

high school seniors from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 and

reported that students who sought college-going information from a high school

counselor by 10th grade were twice as likely to apply to at least one college and

3.5 times more likely to apply to two or more colleges. Using information from

the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002, Belasco (2013) examined data for

11,260 students from 750 schools that represented 2,679,049 students across the

United States and compared outcomes for students who visited a high school

counselor only once in either 10th or 12th grades or in both grades and reported

that students across all socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds were between 8% and

20% more likely to enroll in 4-year universities depending on whether they saw a

high school counselor only once or twice, respectively, between 10th and 12th

grades. Belasco (2013) further reported that the lowest SES students were, on

average, 75% less likely than the highest SES students to enroll in 4-year

universities even if they had visited with a counselor. Belasco (2013), however,

showed that low SES students benefitted more from visiting a high school

counselor, by as much as 30% in some instances, than higher SES students when

enrolling at any postsecondary institution versus 4-year universities specifically.

High School Counselors as Social Capital

Researchers, investigating varying aspects of education, applied the theory of social capital when discussing interactions between students, teachers, parents, and school counselors (Belasco, 2013; Cholewa, Burkhardt, & Hull, 2015; Dika & Singh, 2002; Kim & Schneider, 2005; McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012; McKinney & Novak, 2014: Perna & Titus, 2005; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011; Roksa & Deutshclander, 2018; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Coleman (1988) defined social capital as a resource that depended upon trustworthiness of the social environment and the extent of obligations held between individuals in a social network. Lin (1999, 2000, 2001) explained the premise of social capital as an investment in social relations with expected return. Both Coleman (1988) and Lin (2001) agreed that social capital holds value for its possessor. Lin (2001) further defined social capital as resources embedded in social networks that individuals may access and use.

Coleman (1988) asserted that identifying the function of certain aspects of social structure, such as high school counselors within the context of education, social capital can be conceptualized as an aid in accounting for different outcomes at the level of individual actors. McKillip et al. (2012) stated, "The social capital research suggests that students without social capital from other sources need substantive, on-going interactions with school-based institutional agents such as school counselors, and benefit from them in ways that other students do not (p. 55). Kim and Schneider (2005) further explained the application of social capital theory in educational research by applying the concepts of *functional specificity* and *aligned actions*. Kim and Schneider (2005) argued that forms of

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social capital are only valuable based on the circumstances in any given situation and that researchers should be more concerned with the "dynamic properties of social capital, especially as they relate to the goal-directed actions of network members" (p. 1183). Kim and Schneider (2005) further asserted that functionally specific actions between actors that are critically associated with desired outcomes are called aligned actions. Researchers indicated that high school counselors and students are actors within the high school context (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; McKillip et al., 2012). Kim and Schneider (2005) related these concepts:

> Through actions that are functionally specific to their adolescent's goal of gaining admission to college, parents can provide a bridge to resources and information outside the family that enable the adolescent to make a more informed choice of college; such actions reflect parents' dynamic role as social resources for their children. (p. 1182)

Perna and Titus (2005) investigated the relationship between parental involvement as social capital and college enrollment and found that student enrollment at 2-year colleges and 4-year universities were linked to the number of resources, including high school counselors, within the high school. Other researchers linked parent knowledge to high school counselors and recommended increased communication between the two as a means of supporting students (Gibbons et al., 2006; Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2011). Gibbons et al. (2006) stated:

> When school counselors educate parents directly, they are influencing students indirectly as well. Many parents, however, seem to be relying on

teachers and counselors to guide their children, so that extensive outreach

to parents may be necessary if school counselors are to involve them in

their students' planning. (p. 176)

Griffin et al. (2011) reported that school counselors were second choice among

rural students as most helpful for plans for after high school (25.1% less than

parents) and suggested counselors collaborate with parents to provide accurate

and useful information about after high school plans.

Just as parents function as social capital for students and are linked to the

school by counselors, researchers agreed that high school counselors may also

serve as a form of social capital for students within the school (Belasco, 2013;

Bryan et al., 2011; Savitz-Romer, 2012). Farmer-Hinton and Adams (2006)

indicated, "Counselors, as institutional agents, use their social ties with students to

impose expectations and share resources for students' educational endeavors.

Regarding college access, counselors create the college-going culture of the

school by enforcing clear expectations about college access" (p. 105).

McDonough (2005) indicated that high school counselors not only affected

college enrolment but also acted as social capital agents by creating a worldview

and normative expectations. According to Plank and Jordan (2001):

Social capital theory is a useful tool in explaining the roles of networks of

people in providing information and resources critical for gaining

acceptance into college. Indeed, social networks may be at least as potent

in facilitating college choice as a students' individual agency or

judgement. (p. 950)

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These assertions aligned with the concepts of both Coleman (1988) and Lin (1999) and provided a lens through which the interactions between high school students and high school counselors could be viewed.

High School Counselors and Academic Match

According to Smith et al. (2012), academic match is based on college selectivity, students' academic ability, and other student needs and occurred when a student was matched to a college based on the student's qualifications and the level of institutional selectivity. Researchers relied on information from the Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index that ranks 4-year universities based on SAT/ACT scores, high school GPA, class rank of accepted students, and the school's admission rate to categorize schools according to level of institutional selectivity within their respective studies (Belasco & Trivette, 2015; Roksa & Deutschlander, 2018; Smith et al., 2012; Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013). Researchers considered attributes and characteristics to determine a student's academic match for a postsecondary institution such as academic achievement, financial needs, career goals, and social requirements (Belasco & Trivette, 2015; Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2009; Roderick et al., 2011; Roksa & Deutschlander, 2018; Smith et al., 2013).

Smith et al. (2012) used data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988 and the Education Longitudinal Study (ELS) of 2002 to examine undermatch among 6,490 high school seniors in 1992 and 9,130 high school seniors in 2004. These researchers found, based on the level of selectivity for the postsecondary institution, the 1992 cohort matched at 70.2% at the very selective level and undermatched at 29.8%. Smith et al. (2012) reported that

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53.8% of students in the 1992 cohort mismatched at the selective level. While

percentages were lower for the somewhat selective and nonselective levels, Smith

et al. (2012) indicated that students still mismatched at rates between 35-43%.

Although the 2004 data indicated greater numbers of academic match, Smith et al.

(2012) reported between 35-47% undermatch across the four levels of selectivity.

Smith et al. (2013) used the NELS 1988 and ELS 2002 data to examine

the extent of academic undermatch for students who applied to 2-year colleges

across the nation. They found that lower-SES students undermatched 49.6% as

compared to higher-SES students at 34% (Smith et al., 2013). They also

determined that "students who live in rural areas are more likely to undermatch

than both suburban and urban students" (Smith et al., 2013, p. 248).

Other researchers reported undermatch for students based on low-SES

levels, and among urban students applying to 4-year universities (Roderick et al.,

2011; Roksa & Deutschlander, 2018). Interestingly, Roksa and Deutschlander

(2018) determined that increased numbers of sources of information related to

college such as high school counselors, college websites, school personnel, and

personal social networks outside of school decreased undermatch rates. Roksa

and Deutschlander (2018) reported that applying to one additional college

decreased the likelihood of undermatch by over 60%. Belasco and Trivette

(2015) determined that visiting a high school counselor was associated with a

lower likelihood of undermatch. Belasco and Trivette (2015) also reported

"low-SES students with access to *Very Selective* [emphasis added in original]

institutions, who attended rural high schools, undermatched at a rate of 86.4%,

which is nearly double the undermatch rate of low-SES students attending urban

schools (p. 249). Similarly, Smith et al. (2012) looked at data for students who enrolled in postsecondary institutions in 1992 and 2004 and indicated that low-SES students from both cohorts showed higher rates of undermatch (22.3% in 1992 and 15.6% in 2004).

Most researchers highlighted the difficulties in examining undermatch because there were both observed and unobserved characteristics of students, and not all students who qualified for postsecondary education were interested in attending college (Belasco & Trivette, 2015; Roderick et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2011; Rodriguez, 2015; Roksa & Deutschlander, 2018; Smith et al., 2012). Bastedo and Flaster (2014) noted three major assumptions of undermatch research: (a) researchers were able to stratify postsecondary institutional levels in a meaningful way, (b) researchers could accurately predict student admittance based on varying selectivity, and (c) postsecondary inequality could be reduced and student outcomes improved by using achievement scores such as SAT or ACT to match low-income college students to appropriate institutions. Roksa and Duetschlander (2018) addressed each of the concerns raised by Bastedo and Flaster and determined that effects for selectivity are shown across the stratification levels of postsecondary institutions and are especially prevalent at the extreme lower end of the distribution which is the end Bastedo and Flaster (2014) contend is worthy of study. Roksa and Deutschlander (2018) argue, in response to Bastedo and Flaster's (2014) contention against the ability of researchers to accurately predict student admittance based on selectivity, that the study of undermatch is not about making perfect predictions but about presenting compelling statistical comparisons. Finally, Roksa and Deutschlander (2018)

argued the literature surrounding undermatch does not support the final assertion made by Bastedo and Flaster regarding the use of SAT or ACT scores to match students to appropriate institutions to reduce postsecondary inequality.

Belasco and Trivette (2015) used data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 which included data from 11,720 students across the United States with access to 4-year universities that represented 2.9 million students attending 21,900 high schools. Belasco and Trivette (2015) reported that rural students were between 61-67% more likely to undermatch depending on the selectivity level of the institution to which they applied. The Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (TACIR) (2016) related that, by applying the U.S. Census Bureau's definition of rurality, in 2010 nearly 70 of the 95 Tennessee counties (73.68%) were more than 50% rural. Combined, the data from these two sources indicated that over half the students in nearly 73% of Tennessee counties could have been affected by undermatch simply because they were from rural school districts.

Challenges for Rural Students

Researchers highlighted the difficulties of defining rural areas (Provasnik et al., 2007; Ratcliffe et al., 2016; Roehrich-Patrick et al., 2016). Ratcliffe et al. (2016), writing for the U.S. Census Bureau, defined rural as any area that is not urban and defined urban as areas with a population of at least 50,000 people or urban clusters with a population of between 2,500 and 50,000 people. Provasnik et al. (2007) further defined rural areas by applying the National Center for Education Statistics's urban-centric locale categories to render three categories of rurality: (a) fringe—census-defined territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles

from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster, (b) distant—census-defined territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster, and (c) remote—census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (p. 2). Provasnik et al. (2007) reported that in 2004 more than half of all operating school districts in the United States and one-third of all public schools were located in rural areas. Researchers highlighted the fact that rurality is characterized by more than just population or location and point to other factors such as income, educational attainment, and employment (Provasnik et al., 2007; Roehrich-Patrick et al., 2016).

Provasnik et al. (2007) reported that in 2004 the Southern states contained the largest percentage of rural students enrolled in public schools and included Tennessee among the most rural states. Roehrich-Patrick et al. (2016) acknowledged that, depending on the factors included in a given formula, the definition of rurality changes dramatically. Roehrich-Patrick et al. (2016) reported that regardless of the formula or model used to determine rurality, a majority of the 95 counties in Tennessee were still considered rural.

The National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) (2016) reported that geographic and cultural isolation and demographic shifts to more diverse student populations were some barriers and issues that rural students in America face. Irvin, Byun, Meece, and Farmer (2012) examined the self-reported data from approximately 7,076 rural high school students from across the United

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States and determined that getting married, the need to support family, and an aversion to leaving friends were among the perceived barriers. Irvin et al. (2012) also reported that lower levels of parental education was related to more perceived barriers, as were economic hardships. The researchers also indicated that rural students tended to perceive fewer barriers as they grew older (Irvin et al., 2012).

Poverty is one characteristic of rural schools (Hann-Morrison, 2011; Hines, 2002; Monk, 2007; NASBE, 2012). Hann-Morrison (2011) stated, "In considering service delivery in rural communities, the influence of poverty remains of utmost importance and fully considered . . . In southern states, however, the picture seems especially grim" (p. 28). Byun, Irvin, and Meece (2012) posited, "Family income was significantly related to bachelor's degree completion among rural students. Students whose family income was $50,000 or more were more likely than students whose family income was $25,000 or less to earn a bachelor's degree" (p. 474).

Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) used data for 15,000 eighth graders from the NELS of 1988 to determine that lower SES students were 18-51% less likely to qualify for postsecondary education (especially 4-year universities) as compared to other SES levels. These same students were 55% less likely to apply to postsecondary institutions (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). Belasco (2013) showed that lower SES students benefitted more than their peers in other SES levels from contact with a high school counselor, and lower SES students who visited a high school counselor at least once in their sophomore and senior years of high school were more likely than their higher-SES peers to enroll in 4-year universities; the effect size increases from near negligible (highest-SES) to 2 (lowest-SES).

Griffin et al. (2011) reported that "high school counselors may be particularly influential in the college enrollment plans of low-income students and students of color" (p. 73).

Ali and McWhirter (2006) investigated the vocational/educational aspirations of 338 high school juniors from five high schools in rural Appalachia. Ali and McWhirter (2006) determined that lower-SES students reported fewer aspirations to attend postsecondary education. These same students reported increased aspirations for full-time work after high school (Ali & McWhirter, 2006). They further reported that "participants who aspired to vocational technical training also reported lower SES than their college-bound counterparts" (Ali & McWhirter, 2006, p. 104).

Researchers used data from the NELS of 1988 to examine disparities between rural and nonrural students from across the United States (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). Byun, Irvin, and Meece (2012) used a sample of approximately 6,000 students and determined that "rural students (3.67) had significantly lower curriculum intensity than suburban (3.80) and urban (3.93) students" (p. 473). Byun, Irvin, and Meece (2012) also reported that rural students were from between 1-12 percentage points more likely than suburban and urban students, respectively, to attend a public college but were 7% less likely than their urban and suburban peers to enroll in a selective college. Byun, Meece, and Irvin (2012) examined data from nearly 9,500 students included in the NELS of 1988 and determined that suburban and urban students were 61% and 106%, respectively, more likely than rural students to earn a bachelor's degree. These researchers posited, "Encouragement from high school teachers and counselors,

as well as college faculty and counselors, may offer additional social support for rural students to persist through college to degree attainment" (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012, p. 481).

According to Provasnik et al. (2007), college enrollment in rural areas across the United States was lower (27%) than in urban areas such as cities (37%), suburban areas (37%), or towns (32%), and 17% of those rural students who attended college had earned a bachelor's degree as their highest level of education. Provasnik et al. (2007) also reported that around 37% of rural parents expected their children to attain a bachelor's or master's degree. Griffin et al. (2011) investigated sources of college-going information for rural high school students and suggested that the incongruity between parental expectations and student outcomes is related, in part, to lack of communication between high school counselors, students, and parents. Griffin et al. (2011) reported parents were the number one source for college information among rural high school students, and 72% of students reported asking parents versus 41% who sought assistance from high school guidance counselors. Griffin et al. (2011) further stated, "School counselors were reported as being most helpful by 28.9% of the students. However, results suggest that school counselors become increasing more helpful to students as they approach graduation" (p. 177). Other researchers cited a need for increased communication with high school counselors regarding postsecondary decisions (Belasco & Trivette, 2015; Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010). Researchers highlighted the need for counselors to increase interaction with parents of high school students in an attempt to better

support students with postsecondary decisions (Griffin et al., 2011;

Hann-Morrison, 2011; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010). Gibbons et al. (2006) stated:

> When school counselors educate parents directly, they also are influencing
>
> students indirectly as well. Many parents, however, seem to be relying on
>
> teachers and counselors to guide their children, so that extensive outreach
>
> to parents may be necessary if school counselors are to involve them in
>
> their students' planning. (p. 176)

Bright (2018) reviewed extant literature regarding the needs of rural

students and how counselors might address those needs. Bright (2011) concluded

that rural students face increased poverty, increased likelihood of transience and

homelessness, increased likelihood of changing schools, and increased untreated

mental health related issues. Schafft (2006) investigated student transiency in a

rural New York school district and reported that lower SES, rural students lived in

an average of six residences over a five-year period; some lived in 10 or more

residences in the same period. Schafft (2006) concluded that the high level of

transiency was the leading cause of school change among low-SES, rural students

within the district. Monk (2007) indicated that instability among rural student

populations can stem from both poverty "and the tendency of impoverished

families to move from community to community to escape creditors and abusive

spouses and to try to find work" (p. 166). Bright (2018) reported school

counselors in rural schools can support students "by hosting FAFSA workshops,

creating and sending newsletters home regarding mental health and educational

support resources, and providing information regarding community services

available to parents" (p. 13).

Chapter III: Methodology

Perna et al. (2008) and Stone-Johnson (2015) relied on qualitative research methods to investigate various aspects of counseling in educational settings. Montiero-Leitner et al. (2006) used a mixed methods approach to study the role of rural school counselors by analyzing written responses within a survey instrument. Montiero-Leitner et al. (2006) collected qualitative responses and revealed that school counselors reported participating in non-guidance activities and "only high school counselors delineated that their time was spent in planning career fairs and writing letters of recommendation for scholarships and college applications" (p. 249). Stone-Johnson (2015) examined whether or not school counselor actions aligned with ASCA standards. Perna et al. (2008) utilized both focus groups and semi-structured interviews to gather responses from teachers and school counselors. Perna et al. (2008) reported that "counselors adapt the orientation of financial aid information to reflect both the characteristics of the student body and the state financial aid context" (p. 145). Perna et al. (2008) also indicated "the content of financial aid advising varies based on whether a school is located in a state with a large merit-based aid program" (p. 145). The researcher in the current study relied on qualitative research methodology similar to previous researchers to determine if high school counselors encouraged students to apply for TN Promise without regard to student academic match.

Research Design

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "The antecedents to what we call qualitative research today can be traced back to anthropology, sociology, and various applied fields of study such as journalism, education, social work,

medicine, and law" (p. 19). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) further reported that by

the end of the 20th century, qualitative research was an established methodology.

Hatch (2002) reported that during the 1970s and early 1980s, qualitative research

began to be viewed as a legitimate form of educational research.

This researcher chose a basic qualitative design because qualitative

research is primarily concerned with constructing reality of a phenomenon based

on textual and visual data collected in a natural setting (Hatch, 2002; Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) indicated that basic qualitative design

is used broadly across many disciplines and is "probably the most common form

of qualitative research found in education" (p. 24). The researcher interviewed

high school counselors and used a constructivist approach to understand

interactions between school counselors and students regarding the TN Promise

and to determine if high school counselors considered student academic match

when enrolling students in TN Promise.

Participants of the Study

Researchers used purposeful sampling in qualitative studies to gain

insights from specific individuals or learn about a specific phenomenon (Creswell,

2012, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). According to

Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that

the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must

select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 96). Wiersma and Jurs

(2009) indicated, "The logic of purposeful sampling is based on a sample of

information-rich cases that is studied in depth. There is no assumption that all

members of the population are equivalent data sources" (p. 342).

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated, "Snowball, chain, and network sampling is perhaps the most common form of purposeful sampling" (p. 98). The researcher used snowball sampling to recruit potential participants for the study. The researcher chose three high school counselors that met the criteria for the study. The initial three high school counselors then recommended other high school counselors who might have been interested in participating (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As interviews were completed with each counselor, the interviewee was asked for further recommendations for possible participants. The researcher used snowball sampling because this form of purposeful sampling allowed for enhanced confidentiality and anonymity for participants. The researcher was able to recruit participants more randomly since each participant that was recommended was able to self-select into the study, and the researcher did not specifically choose each participant.

The researcher was interested in practices and perceptions of high school counselors regarding TN Promise and academic match; therefore, the researcher deemed it necessary to ask high school counselors about this phenomenon directly. The researcher developed the following criteria for including participants in the study: (a) the participant was a high school counselor certified by the State of Tennessee, (b) the participant worked in a high school in Tennessee, (c) the participant worked in a high school located within a rural school district, and (d) the participant worked in a school that participated in the TN Promise program. The researcher applied typical purposeful sampling to select participants that reflected "the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 97).

The researcher used snowball sampling to obtain the participants ($n = 8$) for this study from the population of high school counselors in rural school districts in East Tennessee. The participants for this study were from three rural districts. The researcher also chose districts that represented varying levels of rurality as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau (Ratcliffe et al., 2016; Roerich-Patrick et al., 2016). One of the districts fell within the remote rural category. The other two districts fell within the fringe rural category.

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, the researcher submitted requests to the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Upon approval from the IRB, the researcher sent an email requesting participation (see Appendix A) to three high school counselors in the schools who met the criteria for the study. The researcher included informed consent information with each invitation (see Appendix B). The researcher collected the consent forms from each counselor via email, printed them, and stored them in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home office which could only be accessed by the researcher. At the conclusion of the initial three interviews, the researcher asked each participant for recommendations of other high school counselors who might be interested in participating in the study. The researcher contacted the new high school counselors via email or face-to-face depending on circumstances. Each new potential participant was asked to sign an informed consent form which was collected and filed in the locked filing cabinet previously mentioned.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "In most forms of qualitative research, some and occasionally all of the data are collected through interviews"

(p. 108). Authors reported that interviews are advantageous for qualitative research when the phenomenon of interest cannot be directly observed (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher used interviews to gather data because the study's focus was on past actions of high school counselors that could not be replicated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Creswell (2014), "One-on-one interviews are ideal for interviewing participants who are not hesitant to speak, who are articulate, and who can share ideas comfortably" (p. 218). The researcher felt that high school counselors met Creswell's (2014) description of good interview candidates. The researcher chose to interview high school counselors because they are principal actors in directly providing information to students as they make postsecondary decisions, especially regarding TN Promise. The researcher chose a semi-structured interview format to gain answers to specific questions but still allow flexibility in the interview to probe more deeply as issues and information emerged (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher developed an interview protocol with a list of 11 questions (see Appendix C) because:

> . . . having fewer broader questions unhooks you from the interview guide [protocol] and enables you to really *listen* [emphasis in original] to what your participant has to share, which in turn enables you to better follow avenues of inquiry that will yield potentially rich contributions. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 126)

The researcher recorded each interview using a digital audio recorder. Most interviews were conducted at the work place of the participants. Two participants requested to be interviewed at a local 2-year college where they were meeting

with upcoming high school seniors to create student accounts to prepare for TN

Promise registration in the coming school year. The researcher assigned each

participant a code at the beginning of the interview session to be used in data

analysis. No personal information regarding identity was collected or recorded.

   Pilot testing. Creswell (2012) suggested completing a pilot test of the

interview protocol to "determine that the individuals in the sample are capable of

completing the survey and that they can understand the questions" (p. 390). The

researcher invited three high school counselors from rural school districts to pilot

the interview protocol. The researcher emailed a copy of the interview protocol to

each pilot participant along with instructions for providing feedback. Each

participant emailed the completed pilot document back to the researcher. There

were no suggested changes from any participant in the pilot test.

   Role of the researcher. The researcher acted alone in this study and,

therefore, was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016). The researcher conducted all interviews and analyzed all data.

Each question in the interview protocol was carefully tailored by the researcher

who ensured that all questions answered the research questions. The researcher

utilized purposeful sampling to include only high school counselors that would

potentially possess the most accurate information related to school

counselor-student interactions regarding TN Promise.

   The researcher maintained ethical standards throughout the study.

According to Creswell (2012), ethical research "needs to be honestly reported,

shared with participants, not previously published, not plagiarized, not influenced

by personal interest, and duly credited to authors that make a contribution"

(p. 279). The researcher strove to provide accurate and honest reporting of all

portions of the study. Participants were invited to review some or all of the

analyzed data for feedback regarding accuracy and to reduce bias on the part of the

researcher. The researcher endeavored to accurately credit all contributors and

sources of information. The researcher's only goal for completing this study was

to determine the extent to which high school counselors may or may not consider

academic match for students as it relates to TN Promise. The researcher employed

reflexivity to provide open discussion about potential assumptions, biases, and

dispositions throughout the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Further, the

researcher ensured privacy and protection from harm by anonymizing data and

securing sensitive information.

 Analytical Methods

The researcher scheduled appointments with each high school counselor

who agreed to participate in the study. The researcher developed an interview

protocol and then conducted a semi-structured interview with each participant. At

the beginning of each interview, the researcher assigned a code based on district

and participant number (ex., UC1, CC2) to each participant. This code was used

throughout the study to reference responses in lieu of the participant's name to

protect anonymity. The researcher chose to complete the transcriptions by hand

because the number of interviews was relatively small and hand transcription

allowed the researcher to become familiar with the data (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016). After each interview had been transcribed, the researcher provided a copy

of the transcription, via email, to the participant to check for accuracy and suggest

any needed changes.

After all the interview transcripts were reviewed by participants, the researcher analyzed the data. Creswell (2012, 2014), Merriam and Tisdell (2016), and Wiersma and Jurs (2009) reported various methods of coding qualitative interview data. The researcher chose to apply Creswell's (2014) coding process which includes the following steps: (a) organize and prepare the data for analysis; (b) read through all the data (i.e., transcripts); (c) begin open coding by choosing one transcript and read through it a second time assigning codes to important phrases or segments of text; (d) make a list of the codes rendered from the first document, group similar and redundant codes; (e) apply the new list of axial codes to the remaining documents in the data set, highlight specific quotes that support each code; and (f) reduce the list of codes to five to seven themes that can be supported with rich description from the data. After the data had been analyzed, coded, and themes identified, the researcher reported the findings using quotes from the participant interviews to support each theme.

Researchers suggested the use of detailed description is an integral part of reporting qualitative research findings (Creswell, 2012, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Creswell (2014) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) used the term rich, thick description when discussing how qualitative research results should be conveyed. The researcher attempted to include as much detail as possible to allow readers to feel immersed in the experience as related by the participants (Creswell, 2012). As each theme developed, the researcher identified specific quotes and pieces of data that were combined to illustrate how participants experienced certain situations or how they perceived phenomena.

Reliability and Validity

Creswell (2014) Merriam and Tisdell (2016) indicated that validity and reliability in qualitative research were more concerned with trustworthiness than replicability. Creswell (2014) offered various strategies to increase the trustworthiness of qualitative research including triangulation; member checks; rich, thick description; and reflexivity. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated, "Probably the best-known strategy to shore up the internal validity of a study is what is known as *triangulation* [emphasis in original]" (p. 244). The researcher interviewed multiple participants from different schools across several rural districts. In this manner, the researcher triangulated data to ensure themes occurred across all data sources and to check for accuracy of information received during interviews across all participants.

By using snowball sampling, the researcher was able to recruit potential participants in a random manner. Although the initial three participants were purposely chosen by the researcher, the researcher relied on referrals from participants for the majority of high school counselors who were interviewed. The researcher was able to remove potential bias by using this practice which increased the trustworthiness of the sample selection.

Creswell (2014) described member checking as taking back parts of polished or semi-polished portions of the analysis to participants to allow them to check for accuracy and to see if they agree with the analysis to that point. The researcher followed this strategy by inviting participants to review the analysis of their transcript data. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "Participants should be able to recognize their experience in your interpretation or suggest

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some fine-tuning to better capture their perspectives" (p. 246). The researcher used feedback from participants to make suggested changes to better reflect their perspectives and experiences to bolster consistency between the data collected and the results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Limitations and Delimitations

According to Creswell (2014), "Limitations are potential weaknesses or problems with the study identified by the researcher" (p. 199). Simon and Goes (2013) describe limitations as matters or occurrences that are beyond the control of the researcher. The researcher began data collection during the summer months. All schools were closed for summer break and many counselors, who are only employed for 10 months of the year, were also on summer break. Many counselors who were potential participants for the study were unavailable due to busy work schedules. This limited the number of participants for the study. The researcher was aware of the potential limitation of the number of participants due to the time of year but believed a point of saturation could be reached with as few as 10 interviews. The researcher felt confident that over the course of the summer this level of saturation could be met. The researcher reached a point of saturation after eight interviews.

The researcher used snowball sampling which led to limitations in the number of participants in the study. Although each counselor was asked to give referrals for new potential participants, not all counselors made referrals. Also, the researcher was unable to contact all counselors who had been referred by participants. These factors potentially limited the number of possible participants for the study.

"The delimitations of a study are those characteristics that arise from limitations in the scope of the study (defining the boundaries) and by the conscious exclusionary and inclusionary decisions made during the development of the study plan" (Simon & Goes, 2013, para. 8). The researcher chose to investigate if high school counselors encouraged students to apply for TN Promise without regard to student academic match which was the first delimitation of the study (Simon & Goes, 2013). Due to the lack of previous research regarding TN Promise, the researcher was not able to locate any research related to academic match and TN Promise. The researcher needed to determine if practices of high school counselors might potentially lead to academic undermatch and, therefore, was not interested in measuring academic match in this study.

Because the researcher was interested in academic match as related to TN Promise, the study involved only high school counselors in Tennessee where the TN Promise scholarship was awarded. The researcher was not interested in replicability of the study; rather the researcher purposed to gain understanding of the meanings and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) of high school counselors, how they interpreted the importance of academic match, and if they provided information about academic match to those students who qualified for the TN Promise.

There was a limited number of potential participants because only high school counselors in Tennessee schools could provide information regarding TN Promise. Participants were further limited because the researcher was interested in students from rural schools; therefore, only schools in rural areas of Tennessee

were used in the study. Although these limitations existed, the researcher felt that

high school counselors in rural Tennessee schools were the best and most direct

source of information to answer the research questions for the current study.

A further delimitation related to participants arose due to the fact that the

researcher chose to include only schools in rural districts in Tennessee. The

researcher excluded all schools that were not considered rural and were not

located in Tennessee. The researcher did not feel that high school counselors

outside Tennessee would possess any relevant information related to TN Promise.

The researcher also did not include other potential sources of information for TN

Promise, such as mentors, parents, or students, because it was unlikely that either

of these populations could provide information that was directly relevant to

counselor perceptions.

Assumptions and Biases of the Study

The researcher assumed that the high school counselors who participated

in this study acted in the best interest of the students. There may have been cases

in which the high school counselor acted selfishly or with motives unrelated to the

interest of the students. For example, high school counselors in certain schools

may have felt pressure from administrators to increase the number of participants

in TN Promise as a means to meet official or unofficial enrollment goals set by

the school or the state. While there is no record of this actually occurring in any

school included in the study, the potential existed for such practices to occur yet

not be reported during the study since the researcher would not have known to

have specifically asked about it. In such cases, students may have received faulty

or inadequate information regarding TN Promise or postsecondary options.

The researcher also assumed that participants answered questions accurately and honestly during the interviews. The researcher made every attempt to inform participants of the voluntariness of the study and that responses would be safe-guarded to ensure privacy. The researcher did not feel that any participant would have reason to be untruthful or misleading; however, there was no way to ensure the honesty of participant answers and the researcher accepted all responses at face value.

The researcher was an educator in Tennessee and a parent of a student who recently graduated from a rural Tennessee high school. The researcher was also a tnAchieves mentor and received training to guide TN Promise recipients but was never assigned a group of students due to the decline in the number of TN Promise participants at that time. Due to these occurrences, the researcher had some first-hand knowledge of the TN Promise scholarship and the qualification process. The researcher also had personally interacted with high school counselors in a project unrelated to the current study in which counselors provided general information regarding TN Promise. The researcher did not ask, and was not given, any information related to student academic match during that project but did gain an awareness of the pressures counselors face in meeting guidelines and expectations set forth by the TDOE.

Chapter IV: Analyses and Results

The researcher conducted this study with the intent to explore the

practices of high school counselors in rural Tennessee schools and how TN

Promise guidelines coupled with high school counselor practices may, or may not,

consider academic match when assisting students with postsecondary decisions.

Due to the lack of research in the extant literature regarding TN Promise, the

researcher hoped to increase the literature base and fill gaps in the literature

regarding this topic. The researcher relied on referrals from each participant to

gain access to additional possible participants using snowball effect, a form of

purposeful sampling. The researcher anticipated reaching a point of saturation

after completing 10-12 interviews but actually met the point of saturation after

eight interviews. At this point, the researcher found that most responses to the

questions in the interview protocol were similar and no new information was

being provided; therefore, the researcher stopped conducting interviews after

eight interviews.

Data Analysis

The researcher applied social capital theory to help understand and

explain the relationships between high school counselors and students regarding

their interactions concerning TN Promise and postsecondary decision making.

The researcher crafted the research questions for this study and the interview

protocol to gather information that might illuminate the social capital established

between high school counselors and the students they support. Participants

responded to 11 questions in the interview protocol (see Appendix C) with

additional probing questions to clarify information. Participants provided the

number of years they had worked as a high school counselor in response to the

first question and indicated a range from 1-15 years with an average of 7.8 years.

All participants, in reply to the second question, reported that students from their

respective schools enrolled in a variety of postsecondary institutions including

2-year community colleges, technical schools, and 4-year universities, but most

(N=6) indicated that a majority of students enrolled in 2-year community college

or technical school. All eight participants reported that all students are

encouraged to participate in TN Promise in response to question number seven.

Participants provided responses to the remaining eight questions that varied from

each other by degrees.

The researcher analyzed high school counselor interview responses by

applying Creswell's (2014) six-step coding process. After reading all transcripts,

the researcher chose one transcript randomly and read through the responses and

applied open coding by assigning codes to important phrases and segments of text

and identified 25 initial codes. The researcher then made a list of the open codes

and grouped similar and redundant codes to render a list of nine axial codes (see

Table 1). Using the axial codes, the researcher then read each transcript

highlighting specific quotes that supported each code. After all transcripts were

coded, the researcher reduced the list of codes to three themes (see Table 1).

Table 1

Excerpts from Coding for Participant Responses

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Themes
Apply to all, but most beneficial to go to TN Promise schools especially 2-year colleges	Highest enrolment at 2-year colleges and TCAT	Counselors were intentional regarding TN Promise
TCAT and 2-year college enrollment has increased	No criteria for TN Promise because all students apply	Student postsecondary choices were different before and after the initiation of TN Promise
Promote TN Promise TN Promise not an option	Counselors promote/foster TN Promise with implicit plans and actions	Counselors were not intentional regarding academic match
Foster TN Promise with implicit plans and actions	TN Promise used as a back-up plan	
All encouraged to enroll in TN Promise	Students were enrolling in 2-year colleges and technical schools at increasing rates since the initiation of TN Promise, while enrolment at 4-year universities has decreased	
No criteria for TN Promise		
All apply to TN Promise		
Back-up plan	Students drive the process	
Base decisions on student desires		
Students discouraged when their plans don't include TN Promise		
Student led		
No implicit criteria for academic match		

Research Questions

  Research question 1. What criteria, if any, do high school counselors use to determine a student's match for TN Promise in rural school districts in Tennessee?

  The researcher designed two questions in the interview protocol (see Appendix C) to directly address research question 1: *What criteria, if any, do you provide students to help them make decisions about postsecondary placement that is the best choice for them?* and *How do you determine which students should apply for TN Promise?* In some cases, high school counselors provided information related to research question 1 when responding to other questions within the interview. The researcher analyzed the data by applying open codes and axial codes to render two themes related to research question 1 (see Table 2).

Table 2

Data Sorted in Levels of Coding for Research Question 1

Lean Codes	Refined Codes	Themes
Base decisions on student desires	Students drive the process	Counselors were not intentional regarding academic match
Students are expected to seek answers for themselves	Even when GPA and ACT scores are considered, counselors do not use an implicit criterion for academic match	Counselors were intentional regarding TN Promise
Student led		
No implicit criteria for academic match		
GPA and ACT sometimes considered	Counselors focus on 2-year colleges and technical schools when providing guidance to students even when considering factors such as GPA, ACT scores and access to financial aid	
Counselors focus on 2-year college and technical school even when considering academic match		
Focus on 2-year college and technical school		
Focus on 2-year college and technical school		

Counselors were not intentional regarding academic match. The

researcher derived the theme based on three axial codes. The first of these three

was that students drive the postsecondary decision-making process. UC1 stated:

> Well, a lot of times our students have in mind where they want to go.
>
> Occasionally, we'll direct them, you know, definitely if they're not
>
> sure . . . And we go by what they are on in school, like what focus they are
>
> in they picked. And we'll speak with the individual student and see
>
> what's, you know, what their plans are. And we also go to many—we try

to hit at least two college fairs, and let them get the information themselves, and let them ask questions.

CC3 stated:

I would think, in general, if a student knows what they want, they apply to the college—4-year university—of their choice, and they got a full ride there, well, let's not fool with anything else. Let's get you where you want to go, where you've been accepted, and it's paid for—that kind of thing. I would definitely advise them to go on, you know.

When pressed for clarification regarding whether students were offered assistance to investigate plans other than attending schools that accept TN Promise such as a 4-year university or if they had to ask, high school counselor CC1 stated:

Both ways, actually. Both ways. A lot of our students will just come in and say, you know, 'I need help. I don't really know where I want to go to school.' And it's just—we just open up the conversation, you know, I'm like, 'Well, what do you want to do? What do you see yourself doing? Are you going to teach school? Are you gonna, you know, are you gonna be a nurse? What are you gonna do in life?' And we just start with that conversation. Really, I guess it's more student led. I think that's what you're trying to ask me.

In all, four (50%) of the eight high school counselors interviewed indicated that students drove the decision-making process.

Five high school counselors in the study reported that they considered high school GPA and ACT scores as components of the criteria used to help

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students make postsecondary choices. The second axial code discovered by the researcher was that even when GPA and ACT scores were considered, high school counselors did not use implicit criteria for academic match. UC1 stated:

But, I mean, yeah, definitely if they're looking toward a university and they don't have the ACT or the GPA to get in, I mean, we might direct them in another—push them in another direction, you know, as well.

Similarly, CC4 stated, "Most of the time we just, like, look at their grades and see, you know, realistically what they can do postsecondary." The researcher discovered evidence that, even within a school district, high school counselor practices were inconsistent with each other as exemplified by another high school counselor, CC5, in the same district as CC4 but in a different school who reported, "Well, we talk to them to decide what school they think they want to go to, and then we help them to look up to see, 'Okay, is my ACT score good enough to get into this school? Is my GPA good enough? Do I need to retake the ACT?' One high school counselor, CC5, when asked if the criteria for helping students make decisions about the postsecondary placement that is the best choice for them had changed, stated, "Not really, as—because [local 2-year college] and the community colleges don't really have a set requirement—what you have to have to get into the school. You just might have to take remedials."

Four participants indicated that even when GPA and ACT scores are considered, their focus was on getting students in schools that accepted TN Promise. CC2 stated:

A lot of times we look at student data that the schools give us. Um, average ACT score . . . the average ACT score at [local 4-year university]

55

is 28, and the, I think, the average GPA is 3.87 or 3.9. That's pretty—

that's pretty rough. And, that's coming from competing, whereas, if

you're a transfer student and you've gone to [2-year college], if you have

that associate's degree, they will automatically accept you from—

regardless of your GPA or anything because you've proven to them that

you can do that. Plus, you've done 2 years free, and, I think, that's a big

thing because I think they look at you've worked all the kinks. You've

learned how to study. You've done all that. So, we try to look at that, I

mean, and parents and students are shocked when they see that and they

say, 'What do you mean?' Community college, everybody is accepted,

but you do have to do remedial classes, and they're even setting those up a

little different that you have to make so much progress in order to keep

your loans, now. So, we, I mean, we just use the data—like I said,

sometimes, even then—I—sometimes data lies. Sometimes kids can

overcome things, but it's really hard because, at 18 or 19, if you've not got

some study habits, and you've not prepared, it's really hard to play catch

up at that time.

Similarly, HC1 reported:

I don't know that I . . . I mean, we . . . we talk with kids specifically about

being able to, you know, have the lottery scholarship and ending up with a

3.0, so they qualify for the HOPE scholarships. And, you know, we work

with kids. We have a—we have ACT Prep here, so we have a lot of kids

that don't meet the benchmark. So, we're looking at ACT. We're looking

at GPAs, you know, and trying to get, like I said, kids on campuses to

make sure that that's the best fit for them. And a lot of times my mentality

is, and I tell kids this a lot because I see that they get hung up with it some,

'It's not where you start. It's where you end.' And, so, you've been

home. You've been sheltered. Somebody's taken care of everything for

you. [2-year college] is not a bad place to be. The TCAT [Tennessee

College of Applied Technology] is not a bad place to be. That may not be

where you want to end up, but you gotta start somewhere, and, do, you

know, a lot of our kids go to [local 2-year college]. And we see a lot of

success. And I think one of the reasons that that is our kids need an

in-between step before going to a university for sure, because we have

coddled them, I think.

UC1 reported:

When it comes to community college and TCAT, of course, you know, the

GPA can be anything. But, I mean, yeah, definitely if they're looking

toward a university and they don't have the ACT or the GPA to get in, I

mean, we might direct them in another—push them in another direction,

you know, as well.

This researcher discovered, as the third axial code related to this theme,

that high school counselors focused on 2-year colleges and technical schools

when providing guidance to students even when considering factors such as GPA,

ACT scores, and access to financial aid. UC2 stated:

If they're interested in auto mechanics or plumbing or cosmetology, then I

recommend TCAT or one of the, you know, trade schools. If they're

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interested in a 4-year degree, I encourage them to go to the 2-year to take advantage of the free tuition.

Following the same vein, CC1 stated:

First of all, you've just gotta sit down and—and I think this whole program [TN Promise] really benefits us as counselors because we have to get to know the student. You have to spend time with the student. You have to talk to the student, 'What do you want to do in life?' You know, this, 'We're preparing you for life outside of high school. What do you want to do? How are you going to get there?' And it just depends on—for me—I think the most important thing, regardless of whether it's paid for or not, is what do you want to do? And then you've got to research these universities. You've got to research these colleges—these 2-year colleges—and you've got to ask yourself, 'Do they provide the academics that I need to get where I need to be?' For the most part, I will have to say, [local 2-year college]—those state, 2-year colleges—they do provide a good starting point. You get your basic things there. Those are paid for, and you can move on to a university. An associate degree will transfer anywhere. So, when you get that associate degree, you can go anywhere you want to go and finish up. That's really, really important. We also look at, when they're making this decision on what they're gonna do, their aptitude. We look at ACT scores. You know, are you hitting those benchmarks? Are you struggling? Maybe college is not for you. And it is not for everybody.

Counselors were intentional regarding TN Promise. The researcher

reduced and combined seven open codes and derived the theme based on three

axial codes. The first axial code the researcher discovered was that because high

school counselors encouraged all students to apply to TN Promise, they used no

criteria to determine which students should apply. One hundred percent of

participants (N=8) reported that they worked to get all or almost all students to

apply for the TN Promise scholarship program. Participant CC3 remarked:

> Every student is encouraged to participate, and our goal is to enroll a
>
> 100% of the students. Not all of them end up choosing that, but that's our
>
> goal is to enroll them, get them started, kind of inform them of what their
>
> options are, and then kind of let them navigate past that. We do have
>
> students here—we don't ever reach the 100% goal because we do have
>
> some students here who have limitations that, you know, tech school is not
>
> an option and 4-year school is not an option. Maybe work at all is not an
>
> option. And, so, we take that into consideration and those students don't
>
> apply, but I would say we're 99 plus percent.

UC1 reported:

> We encourage every student. We usually try to sign up every student for
>
> TN Promise whether they—whether they're, at that point, their plans are
>
> to go to college or not. Just for a back-up. We try to get a hundred
>
> percent of our students, which we don't reach that, but we usually get in
>
> the 90s.

HC1 stated:

> We encourage every student to do TN Promise. We—and we work very
>
> hard to have 100%, so usually our—everybody does it. Everybody does
>
> TN Promise. We do have a occasional kid that says, "I'm going to
>
> military, or I know I'm going to work." You know, we don't force a
>
> child, but we do strongly encourage everybody to do that.

Participant CC1 reported, "We encourage everyone. The only students who are
not eligible are those who are graduating with a portfolio [alternative special
education assessment for students who are unable to complete typical annual
testing]." Similarly, CC5 stated, "They are highly encouraged. And we—a
hundred percent of the ones that we know could go somewhere, we try to get
enrolled except for our CDC [comprehensive development classroom] students.
So, we pretty well—everybody."

In fact, high school counselors in this study indicated students were rarely
exempted from enrolling in TN Promise. CC1 reported, "Okay, not all our special
ed. students participate in TN Promise."

After refining open codes, the researcher discovered that high school
counselors promoted and fostered student application to TN Promise with implicit
plans and actions. CC1 reported:

> In fact—I mean we just set aside a day at ____ High School, and I'm sure
>
> _____ High School does as well, where we—that's all—that's what we
>
> do. We get online. We go to the computer labs. We get online, and
>
> everybody registers for TN Promise.

CC2 stated:

> We set up laptops like these sessions that we've been doing this week are
>
> to go ahead and get them a TSAC [Tennessee Student Assistance
>
> Corporation] student portal account, so that, when school starts and that
>
> opens up in October, we'll start enrolling 'em. And we encourage
>
> everyone.

HC1 related:

> We really do—I don't want to say preach, but we really do talk to kids a
>
> lot that, I mean, if you have that goal and that's what you want to do,
>
> there's no reason. And there is no reason, I mean, if one thing, TN
>
> Promise has done for sure, there is no reason that a kid cannot go to the
>
> next level whether it is technical school, whether it is community college,
>
> and I know that they don't pay at university or whatever, but if you want
>
> to do some schooling, there's no reason that you can't go to school at all.

According to participant CC5:

> In our guidance department, we provide information on all the schools and
>
> help with the process of the Promise starting October one—I think that's
>
> the right date. The application opens up, so we help them apply for the
>
> TN Promise. Then we help them fill out financial aid.

The researcher analyzed the data and determined that six high school
counselors interviewed recommended that students use TN Promise as a back-up
plan. UC2 stated:

> I would not discourage them [students] from applying to that program [TN
>
> Promise] because just because you've got a student that might not be

interested in grades right now doesn't mean their interests won't change, mature, circumstances change. I want every one of them to apply and try. UC1 reported, "We usually try to sign up every student for TN Promise whether they—whether they're, at that point, their plans are to go to college or not. Just for a back-up." CC5 stated:

> We just get them all to do. Bring them in and—some of them are hesitant. That's like, 'Well, you might change your mind. This way you have it and that way if you change your mind and don't want to do it, that's fine. But this way, you've got it.

Participant HC1 reported, "You can call it a back-up plan, I mean, things happen, and I tell kids that all the time. I've seen stuff happen from June to August." CC2 stated:

> But I tell them, 'If you're not 100% sure, and you have no visible means of income, then you really want to hang onto it and go to that meeting and wait until the very end.' Because once it's done, they do not let you join back. If you don't attend the meeting, don't meet the registration deadline, don't meet the financial aid deadline, there's no second chances.

Research question 2. What trend of after high-school plans occurred before and after implementation of TN Promise in rural school districts in Tennessee?

The researcher analyzed the data and identified six open codes which were reduced and combined to render a single theme (see Table 3).

Table 3

Data Sorted in Levels of Coding for Research Question 2

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Themes
Apply to all, but most beneficial to go to TN Promise schools especially 2-year colleges	Students were applying to 2-year colleges and technical schools at increasing rates since the initiation of TN Promise, while application at 4-year universities decreased	Student postsecondary choices were different before and after the initiation of TN Promise
4-year universities accept TN Promise but tuition is so high it doesn't help much		
TCAT and 2-year college enrollment has increased	Although some groups of students have experienced more opportunities due to TN Promise, those who may have gone straight to 4-year university choose to settle for 2-year college instead	
Increased access among special education students		
Middle class students benefit the most		
Students settle		

Student postsecondary choices were different before and after the

initiation of TN Promise. The researcher determined that student postsecondary

choices were different before and after the initiation of TN Promise. According to

participants, students applied to 2-year colleges and technical schools at

increasing rates since the initiation of TN Promise, while application to 4-year

universities decreased. HC1 related, "So, the majority of our students go to [local

2-year college]. And I think TN Promise changed that a little bit." HC1 further

indicated that students in her district had gone to both 2-year colleges and

technical schools in near equal numbers before the initiation of TN Promise. HC1 stated:

> I have kids that are going to technical school, but it's just not a large
> portion of my students. I would think when I first came here, it was about
> half-and-half. I'll have to say, like, half [local 2-year college], half tech
> school. And I really think that the TN—I don't think TN Promise did—I
> don't think they did that, but it just happened. It was like, everybody can
> go to college! And, so, kids just started going to community college, or—
> more, or whatever.

CC2 stated, "Yes, more students have decided, but probably based on parent influence, to go ahead and do [local 2-year college] instead of going on to a 4-year institution because they get those first two years free." CC1 reported, "We've seen a big influx into junior colleges and also TCAT as well. TCAT has really grown since that has occurred." UC1 reported, "The majority of our students are [local 2-year colleges] students and TCAT, I would say."

When the open codes (i.e., middle class students benefit the most, increased access among special education students, and students settle) were combined, the researcher developed the axial code that although some groups of students have experienced more opportunities due to TN Promise, students who may have gone straight to 4-year universities chose to settle for 2-year college instead (see Table 3). These data revealed inconsistencies in access among students who were able to apply for TN Promise.

Four participants indicated that middle class students benefitted most from TN Promise. CC5 stated:

I think your middle class and higher-class students have benefitted the most because your lower-income students are going to get the Pell, and it covers the 2-year schools anyway. So, your middle to upper, I think, it's helped them a lot. And, that way if they go and use the TN Promise, they can save that money they would have been putting towards the 4-year if they entered there. So, they can save money and help them out that way.

HC1 reported, "I think the group that has benefitted the most from TN Promise is the kids that don't qualify for federal aid."

Two of the participants were special education counselors and worked solely with that student population. Both reported that students receiving special education services had experienced an increase in access to postsecondary education since the initiation of TN Promise. CC3 stated, "I do feel like, for the students in special education, it has opened up avenues that they don't really think was an option for them." CC1 reported:

Okay, not all our special ed. students participate in TN Promise. Again, we look at ability, and we look—we look at disability. You know, some of our students can't, you know. But we do have some that do go ahead and do their TN Promise. And they do go to—and usually, we have—they end up at TCAT.

High school counselors reported that students were not only enrolling in 2-year colleges at increased rates but were doing so in spite of the fact that those

same students would probably have gone straight to 4-year universities before the initiation of TN Promise. CC5 reported:

> The majority go to [local 2-year college] because of TN Promise and the
> 2-year program or technical school . . . We have more of them choose to
> go the [local 2-year college] route for the first two years because it's free
> instead of going that 4-year because that 4-year may not be free.

Similarly, CC3 stated, "There used to be a focus on just 4-year colleges, and TN Promise has kind of opened up the avenue to think for the 2-year associate's degree in some places and tech schools as well." UC1 further stated:

> I think for us what has changed the most is students that wouldn't have
> normally went to any school has started going to our 2-year schools and
> TCAT. They had to pay for them before. I mean, as far as going—and I
> think it has cut down on some who were going straight into universities as
> well, so they can get that two years free first . . . They may forgo
> something that they really wanted to major in to go to community college
> that may not offer it . . . I guess they're kind of settling with community
> college in some sense.

Summary of Results

The researcher discovered that students in rural Tennessee school districts used the TN Promise scholarship to enroll in 2-year colleges and technical schools in increasing numbers since the initiation of the scholarship program. By applying qualitative data analysis methods, the researcher found evidence that high school counselors were intentional in encouraging students to enroll in TN Promise. The researcher found that high school counselors did not use any

criteria to determine student match for TN Promise; instead they encouraged all students to enroll. High school counselors did report that some groups of students (i.e., special education, middle class) experienced increased access to postsecondary education due to TN Promise. There were students, however, whom high school counselors felt would otherwise have gone straight to a 4-year university who were applying to 2-year colleges and technical schools to use TN Promise funds.

The researcher used qualitative research processes to analyze interview data and answer both research questions for this study. The analysis led to open codes, axial codes, and themes that the researcher derived from responses provided by high school counselors. These data represent the experiences of high school counselors who worked directly with students to provide guidance regarding TN Promise and postsecondary decision making.

Chapter V: Conclusions and Recommendations

The TN Promise scholarship program began in 2014 and has become a vital resource for students in rural Tennessee schools who wish to pursue postsecondary education. There was a lack of research surrounding this program, and the researcher hoped to fill a gap in the extant literature and provide insights into this new funding program. Because in this study the researcher interviewed only high school counselors in Tennessee schools and specifically focused on TN Promise, generalizations were limited to high school counselors in Tennessee schools. Further, the researcher was unable to include substantiation from extant literature for some conclusions drawn from the current study due to the lack of previous research regarding TN Promise. In those cases, the evidence from this study must speak for itself until future research either corroborates or refutes it.

The findings from this study highlighted high school counselor interactions with students. Specifically, the researcher focused on high school counselor practices and actions related to TN Promise as they provided postsecondary guidance to high school students. This study added to the limited data surrounding TN Promise and, hopefully, help fill gaps in the literature base related to this topic. Additionally, this current study underscored the importance of high school counselors for students as gatekeepers of the information regarding TN Promise, appropriate postsecondary academic match, and pursuit of postsecondary education in general.

Discussion and Conclusions of the Study

High school counselors in rural Tennessee schools view the TN Promise scholarship as a valuable resource for high school students. By providing

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guidance regarding TN Promise, high school counselors also act as agents of social capital, which is consistent with findings of other researchers (Belasco, 2013; Bryan et al., 2011; Cholewa et al., 2015; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006). As agents of social capital (Lin, 2001), high school counselors actively foster application to TN Promise by providing information, assisting in the application process, and guiding students through the scholarship program.

High school counselors encourage students to apply for TN Promise without regard to student academic match. This is important because previous researchers indicate that rural students were more likely to undermatch than their non-rural counterparts (Belasco & Trivette, 2015; Smith et al., 2013), and Tennessee students are likely to be affected since 70 of the 95 (73.68%) Tennessee counties are more than 50% rural (TACIR, 2016). Farmer-Hinton and Adams (2006) argue that high school counselors "used both formal and institutional means as well as informal and interpersonal communication" (p. 113) to convince students that they could attend college. This is consistent with the findings of the current study as high school counselors reported steering students toward TN Promise as a sure bet for entering postsecondary education. High school counselors sometimes rely on informal criteria such as GPA and ACT scores to assist students to make decisions about what postsecondary institution is the best match but do not use implicit criteria in such cases. When high school counselors in Tennessee schools do consider academic match, they do so only so far as to which of the schools that participate in TN Promise are best matches for students. Another reason high school counselors do not use implicit criteria when considering academic match to TN Promise may be because they view TN

Promise as a back-up plan and feel all students should enroll in the program just in case they eventually need to access it.

Although there are many people such as parents, teachers, and friends who influence high school student decision making regarding postsecondary choices, high school counselors are among the most influential (Belasco, 2013; Bryan et al., 2011; Camizzi et al., 2009; Fitzpatrick & Schneider, 2016; McDonough, 2005). Tennessee high school students are applying to 2-year colleges and technical schools at increasing rates since the initiation of TN Promise, while application to 4-year universities at the high school level is decreasing. This is due in great part to the fact that high school counselors are discouraging students from applying to 4-year universities even if those schools participate in TN Promise. In most cases reported in this study, high school counselors feel that students would benefit more from attending a 2-year college where tuition rates were lower than 4-year universities, then moving on to a 4-year university to earn a bachelor's degree.

The TN Promise scholarship program is affecting students from various backgrounds in different ways. The researcher found that half of the participants in this study reported that middle-class students receive the most benefit from TN Promise because they do not qualify for need-based financial aid, either federal or state. Although it is encouraging that middle-class students are receiving this benefit, it raises the question of what impact TN Promise actually has on low-SES students especially those in rural areas of the state. Those same middle-class students may be settling for 2-year college or technical school since high school counselors reported that those students would probably have applied to 4-year

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universities in the absence of TN Promise. Students who receive special education services are increasingly accessing TN Promise and applying to postsecondary institutions since the initiation of TN Promise. High school counselors report that this group of students is more aware and feels more confident about making plans to pursue education and training beyond high school even though many students receiving special education services qualify for need-based financial aid and would not likely use TN Promise.

Implications for Practice

This study does not measure academic match among TN Promise recipients, and there is, to date, no research available on that topic; however, high school counselors need to be more aware of academic match for their students. As participants in this study exemplified, high school counselors directly affect the actions of students by actively insisting on student participation in TN Promise. Because other options are not explored and academic match to postsecondary institutions other than those that participate in TN Promise are not discussed, students may suffer. High school students, especially low-SES, rural students, lack knowledge related to postsecondary education and may rely more on high school counselors for appropriate information. These same students are more likely to undermatch (Belasco & Trivette, 2015), but they receive the greatest benefit from contact with high school counselors (Belasco, 2013; Belasco & Trivette, 2015). High school counselors must act responsibly to provide students with as much information as possible regarding application to postsecondary institutions and not limit their guidance to TN Promise only.

Because students are being funneled into TN Promise without regard to academic match, they may be negatively impacted (Light & Strayer, 2000). Students whose academic qualifications recommend them to a more rigorous education at a 4-year university may become dissatisfied at a 2-year college. This could lead to lower persistence rates among students who obtain an associate's degree or even lead them to drop out altogether. Light and Strayer (2000) indicate that undermatched students are less likely to graduate. Further, students who participate in TN Promise and attend a participating school must choose to either stop after obtaining an associate's degree or technical certificate or apply to a 4-year university to continue their educational pursuits without additional TN Promise funding. Students will then be required to navigate the enrollment process at a new institution if they wish to earn a degree higher than an associate's. This may dissuade some students from going further. In the least, those who do go on will face the stressful prospect of not only enrollment but learning the ropes at a new school. Finally, students may find that not all credits earned at one school will transfer to another if they do decide to advance to a higher degree which may create further barriers, especially for rural, low-SES students who already face many obstacles to obtaining postsecondary education (Bright, 2018; Irvin et al., 2012; Schafft, 2006).

Although middle-class students benefit from TN Promise by attending 2-year colleges, most rural, low-SES students will never access TN Promise funds, even though they apply to the program, because they qualify for federal and state need-based financial aid. Those students are not limited in where they can apply their financial aid and could attend a 4-year university anywhere in the

United States if they chose. This raises the question of whether students who qualify for federal and state financial need-based aid might become discouraged after completing all the requirements for TN Promise and then find they receive no benefit from the scholarship since their financial aid covers their costs. High school counselors should provide broader guidance to low-SES students to include consideration of postsecondary institutions that do not participate in TN Promise including 4-year universities and schools outside Tennessee. By focusing on TN Promise enrollment and failing to provide adequate guidance that includes considering academic match, high school counselors are doing a disservice to some of their most vulnerable students.

The finding from this study that students drive the college application process implies that students are receiving their college going information from sources other than high school counselors. This is consistent with findings from previous research in the extant literature that students rely on family and other sources for college-going information (Gibbons et al., 2006; Perna & Titus, 2005; Roksa & Deutschlander, 2015). Students who are less likely to make their own plans or who have little or no social capital outside the school must rely on the advice from high school counselors, which at this point is to enroll in TN Promise. High school counselors might use the information from this study to become more proactive in providing broader guidance earlier in students' educational careers to facilitate better decision making related to postsecondary plans.

Another implication of this study is that high school counselors are using GPA and ACT scores to separate students into 2-year colleges or technical

schools, even though participants reported that neither of these types of postsecondary institutions consider GPA or ACT when making decisions about which students to accept. This practice may lead both students and high school counselors to place less emphasis on the importance of GPA and ACT, which may lead to a decline in one or both over time. The effect of which may be that students will be required to take more remedial courses. This will increase barriers for students by requiring them to take more classes and incur greater costs.

Researchers highlight that counselors have lots of demands placed upon them and generally fill multiple roles within a school (Gibbons et al., 2006; Hann-Morrison, 2011; Hines, 2002; Monteiro-Leitner et al., 2006; Wimberly & Brickman, 2014). High school counselors may benefit from having policies developed that include implicit criteria for academic match. Administrators and high school counselors might use the information from this study to develop implicit criteria to consider appropriate academic matches between students and postsecondary institutions such as GPA and ACT scores, career goals, socioeconomic background, and financial need among other characteristics. Those policies might be developed at the district or building level but could provide support for counselors to help students apply to postsecondary institutions that are the best matches for them.

Recommendations for Future Research

In this study, the researcher did not address students in non-rural school settings. Future research may be conducted similar to this study with non-rural schools as a focus. High school counselors in urban schools may have access to

different resources and may potentially provide guidance to students with more consideration for academic match. Also, it would be interesting to compare findings from similar studies conducted in inner-city settings with those of the current study as rural and inner-city students share many characteristics. Another consideration for future research is that this study was conducted at the busiest times of the school year for high school counselors, May and August. Future researchers may have more participation and better, more thoughtful responses if similar studies are completed in winter and early spring when high school counselors are not as inundated with enrolling students or preparing for graduation and end-of-year activities.

High school counselors work within a system that includes many actors. They do not act alone. Because the focus of this study was the perspectives of high school counselors, the researcher did not investigate the impact that principals, district leaders, or state educational leaders and policy makers might play in the TN Promise scholarship process and how this may or may not affect high school counselor actions regarding academic match for students. Future researchers might include these as foci of studies for further investigation. The researcher realized through completing this study that high school counselors do not seem to be offering guidance to students regarding options other than TN Promise such as discussing 4-year university plans with low-SES students who qualify for federal and state needs-based financial aid. In the future, researchers might investigate more fully whether high school counselors do actually offer guidance for options other than TN Promise that were not revealed in this study,

as the researcher did not know at the time the present study was designed that these might be issues of concern.

Although this study can only be generalized to schools and high school counselors in Tennessee who participate in TN Promise, a larger sample size might produce more robust data. The researcher used eight participants in the current study. While the researcher did reach the point of saturation with these participants, this small sample size limited the number of responses and possibly limited the range of responses that might have been garnered if a larger sample were included. Future researchers may wish to include a larger number of participants. The current study was conducted over several rural school districts; however, by including participants from a wider range school districts, the researcher may have been able to gain better and more insights into TN Promise and academic match.

This study was conducted in East Tennessee. Similar studies conducted in the other grand divisions of the state, Middle and West Tennessee, might be helpful to determine if similar issues and practices are occurring across the state and are not just regional phenomena. State-wide studies or results combined from different studies conducted across the state might yield important information for policy makers at the state level. Robust information from across the state might enable education leaders and policy makers to better streamline the TN Promise program and address issues surrounding this program to better direct funding to those students who most benefit from the TN Promise while still supporting students who may not benefit from the program.

The researcher made two assumptions related to this study. First the researcher assumed that high school counselors who participated in the study acted in the best interest of the students. Although there is no direct evidence to the contrary, one might argue that because high school counselors did encourage all students to participate in TN Promise without considering academic match, they were not acting in the best interest of the students. The researcher found no evidence that high school counselors were purposely misleading students or acting in an unethical manner. To the contrary, participants seemed to genuinely believe that TN Promise is a valuable resource for students and were glad students had access to the scholarship program. The second assumption of this study was that participants answered questions accurately and honestly during the interview. There was no indication that this did not happen. The researcher was satisfied with responses from participants.

This study did not aim to measure academic undermatch among students who participate in TN Promise. Future researchers may wish to focus on this topic in light of the fact that findings from this study show that high school counselors do not consider academic match regarding TN Promise. Future research may also focus on the impact of the current practices of high school counselors regarding TN Promise and if academic mismatch has increased since the initiation of TN Promise. These foci may shed light on how TN Promise is impacting students and may lead to changes that better support students and counselors.

High school counselors who participated in the current study voiced concerns regarding TN Promise that were not directly related to the foci of the

study. One participant indicated that students seem lackadaisical in general regarding academic effort and specifically in applying for scholarships other than TN Promise. Another high school counselor questioned the prudence of encouraging some students who received special education services to enroll in TN Promise because she felt those students were being set up for failure. There were additional concerns that many students and their parents are unaware of costs other than tuition such as fees, books, materials, and transportation that students incur that are not covered by TN Promise. High school counselors worry that some students may end up dropping out of postsecondary education because they find they still cannot afford to go even though they qualify for TN Promise. Future research might be conducted with either one or both of these as foci to investigate student behaviors in response to TN Promise. The TN Promise scholarship program is affecting the lives of Tennessee students. What remains to be seen is whether directing all students toward 2-year colleges or technical schools is the best practice for the state of Tennessee.

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Appendix A

Counselor Permission Request Letter

Dear Staff Member,

My name is Charles Painter, and I am a candidate for Doctor of Education in Instructional Leadership at the Carter and Moyers School of Education at Lincoln Memorial University. I have received permission Lincoln Memorial University to conduct interviews as a part of my research on TN Promise and college match. I am inviting you to participate in this research study. You have been selected because you are a full-time, licensed high school counselor in a rural school. As a high school counselor, you are an important part of the process by which students make decisions about their postsecondary careers. By participating in this study, you will be providing important information regarding how high school counselors affect student academic match and the role TN Promise plays in that process. Your willingness to participate in this study will in no way affect your relationship with the researcher or Lincoln Memorial University.

Your participation in this process will be completely voluntary. The interview will last approximately 20 minutes and will be conducted at your convenience. At any time, you may choose to not provide a response or even discontinue your participation. Responses will be recorded and transcribed, and you will be given the opportunity to review the transcripts to check for accuracy and make needed changes. As the study progresses, you may be asked to provide additional input regarding the analysis of data from your interview. All data including interview recordings and transcripts will be kept confidential to safeguard your privacy and to protect you from any potential harm.

Thank you for considering this request. If you have any questions about this study, please contact me by email at cpainter102@hotmail.com, or by calling XXX-XXX-XXX (cell). You may also contact Dr. Cherie Gaines, dissertation chair, by email at Cherie.gaines@lmunet.edu, or by calling XXX-XXX-XXX.

Sincerely,

Charles A. Painter
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Charles.painter@lmunet.edu

_____
_____

Counselor's Signature   Date

Appendix B

Recruitment Email Message

Dear *Counselor's Name*,

My name is Charles Painter, and I am conducting a study about high school counselors' perceptions of TN Promise. I am inviting you to participate in this study. You will find an informed consent document attached to this email. It provides further information and a space for your signature. I am asking that, if you are willing to participate, you read and sign the consent form.

You may scan the signed document and email it back to me. If you would prefer to mail the document you may send it to:

Charles Painter
XXX
Tazewell, TN 37879

If you wish, I can send you a stamped, self-addressed envelope in which to return the signed informed consent form.

I will be back in touch with you to determine a date and time for the interview should you decide to participate. If you have questions or need further assistance, please feel free to contact me at this email address or by phone at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Kindest regards,

Charles Painter

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Candidate Name: Charles Painter
Date of Interview:
Time Interview Began:
Time Interview Concluded:
Participant Pseudonym:
Participant Information:

Interview (I):
    This interview should take about 20 minutes.

    Do you mind if I record our conversation?

    In fall 2015, the first group of Tennessee students enrolled in the Tennessee Promise program. Because this program is designed to provide free access to colleges/technical schools for the first two years, the 2015 cohort is now exiting the program. To better understand the impact TN Promise is having on college age students, I am gathering data that might shed light on certain aspects of the program. As a high school guidance counselor, you have first-hand knowledge of some of these students which makes you a valuable source of data.

    Your responses will remain confidential, and your identity will remain anonymous.

    You will be provided a printed copy of the transcript of this interview to give you the opportunity to check for accuracy and correct any information.

    Your willingness to participate in this study will in no way affect your relationship with the researcher, Lincoln Memorial University, or Claiborne County school district.

    You may end the interview at any time. Just tell me you want to stop.

    Do you have any questions?

    May we begin?

    Participant (P): Participant Affirmation(s)

    1. How many years have you worked as a high school counselor?

    2. To what types of postsecondary institutions are students from this school applying, such as 2-year colleges, 4-year universities, or technology/trade schools?

3. Have there been changes in the types of postsecondary institutions to which students from this school apply since the introduction of TN Promise? If so, please explain.

4. What role do you play in helping students determine the institutions to which they should apply?

5. What criteria, if any, do you provide students to help them make decisions about the postsecondary placement that is the best choice for them?

6. Has the criteria for this recommendation changed since the initiation of TN Promise?

7. To what extent are students from this school encouraged to participate in the TN Promise program?

8. How do you determine which students should apply for TN Promise?

9. Are there any instances in which you would advise a student to not participate in the TN Promise program? If so, can you describe?

10. What group(s) of students, such as high- or low-SES, first generation college students, rural or urban, etc., do you feel have had the greatest benefit from the TN Promise program?

11. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding student participation in TN Promise and your role as a high school guidance counselor in assisting students in the TN Promise process?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this interview. I appreciate your help. If you have any questions for me once I have gone, feel free to contact me.