The following is an introduction to Michelle Bellessa Frost’s Ph.D. dissertation using THEOP data, which includes the three papers below:

- "Texas Students' College Expectations: Does High School Racial Composition Matter?"
- "Texas Students' Knowledge of University Admissions Policies and Standards: Do High School Counselors Matter?"
- "Replacement or Reinforcement? The Role of Parental Educational Attributes on High School Student Contact with Counselors"
Chapter 1. Introduction

“Hundreds of high-quality, academically rigorous high schools around the country are proving it is possible to prepare all students for success in college, work, and citizenship.”
---Gates Foundation

Schools are charged with many tasks. The preparation of students for post-secondary life, and most notably for college, is a primary endeavor for high schools. Most policy-makers, parents, and ordinary citizens believe that schools influence students’ academic and post-secondary outcomes, including their likelihood of college attendance and completion. Furthermore, the presumption behind many educational policies, including the No Child Left Behind act, court-ordered desegregation, and the charter school movement, is that the quality of schools influence student learning and achievement. As a particular example, the Gates Foundation has given considerable amounts of money for school restructuring on the premise that transforming large impersonal high schools into personalized learning environments results in several desired ends, including reduced student anonymity, the promotion of student self-expression, lowered drop out rates, and increased college attendance (Gates Foundation 2005). However, the effectiveness of most school reform strategies remains inconclusive.

This dissertation is concerned with how high schools are associated with precursors to college attendance. Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) describe a 3-stage process through which students must navigate in order to attend college. These include: (1) college aspiration; (2) search and application; and (3) selection and attendance. In the first stage, beginning in childhood and
progressing through high school, a student sets college attendance and graduation as a goal. After deciding to attend college and, ideally, during the sophomore and junior years of secondary school, students begin the search and application stage. This concludes with a narrowed choice set of potential post-secondary institutions and the submission of applications. The third and final stage is enrollment, conditional on admission.

Research about students’ navigation through these three stages has emphasized how individual characteristics, including their academic achievement, race, and family background explain differences in scholastic outcomes, ranging from aspirations to college attendance. In this dissertation, I add to this body of research by examining the relationship between high school characteristics and various stages of Texas students’ college search processes. Thus, I investigate how high school attributes and within school student-staff interactions are associated with Texas high school seniors’ educational expectations (first stage), their knowledge of Texas university admissions policies and standards (precursor to the search stage), and their exposure to college application assistance from guidance counselors (stage two).

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss relevant literature examining the influence of schools on student behaviors and related methodological issues. This is followed by a description of the research context for this study and a summary of each the three substantive chapters.
**School Effects**

The term “school effects” is a shorthand notation for the idea that schools can influence student behavior. The Durkheimian notion that social systems shape and perhaps determine individual behavior is a grounding tenet of the sociological enterprise. Numerous empirical studies attempt to link individual behavior with social contexts such as countries, communities and neighborhoods, and, of course, schools (for examples, see Buchmann and Dalton 2002; Chubb and Moe 1990; Coleman and Hoffer 1987; Freedman 1974; Nye, Hedges, and Konstantopoulos 2000; Tienda 1991). Indeed, “sociological investigations of school effects began with the hypothesis that global, normative features of the school or neighborhood environment would substantially affect educational outcomes and, thereby, the extent of social inequality” (Hauser, Sewell, and Alwin 1976: 310). Many researchers have enthusiastically looked for evidence to prove that school context influences student outcomes (Hauser et al. 1976; Sorensen and Morgan 2000), resulting in a large body of research of varying substance, methodology, and quality. I do not attempt to summarize either the development of the field over time or the breadth of research evaluating school influences on students. Instead, I selectively choose to focus on significant research that has been influential in the overall area of school effects.

Thus, school effects research attempts to look at whether and how school contexts are associated with individual student outcomes. Two hypothetical research designs show how schools could be compared based on their influence.
on student behaviors. Given a sample of schools with differences in organization, resources, curriculum, or student composition, differential school influences could be identified by assigning either identical students or a random sample of non-identical students to various schools and comparing observed variation in learning (Sorensen and Morgan 2000). The first design is, of course, impossible to implement, while using an experimental design to randomly assign students to schools is rare. Thus, alternative methods have been developed and utilized in the attempt to find and identify school effects. I discuss these later in this chapter.

School effects emanate from distinct attributes that define a school. A school-level factor by definition is any characteristic common to all students enrolled in a school. Extending the work of Ronald Freedman on community effects on fertility decline, these characteristics take two forms (Freedman 1974). First, Freedman describes global attributes, which are characteristics that have no individual-level analogue, and, for schools, include such things as teacher experience, school expenditures, and school academic climate, for example. Second, contextual attributes are based on the aggregation of individual measures, such as mean parental educational level or mean school achievement. Both types of school characteristics describe the school collectivity. To paraphrase Freedman (1974), each student may be characterized as belonging to a school that is rich or poor; high- or low-achieving; Hispanic or white; or any combination in between. Any of these global or contextual attributes can potentially influence student behaviors.
Early systematic studies were concerned with the psychological impact of the socioeconomic composition of the student body on educational aspirations. The status attainment research of Wilson (1959), Michael (1961), Turner (1964), and Boyle (1966) all demonstrated that low income students attending schools with high proportions of high socioeconomic status students were more likely to plan to attend college than would otherwise be expected given their own social class background and academic performance (see also Thrupp 1995).

During this period, James Coleman began a research career spanning nearly 40 years that was centered on the investigation and understanding of how student learning differed across varied school settings. He led a team of researchers early in his career, with work culminating in *The Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, Weinfeld, and York 1966), which has come to be known as the Coleman Report. A congressionally mandated study on the extent and causes of educational inequality in the United States, Coleman concluded little difference existed in the physical resources of schools and that differences in student background were more important in explaining student outcomes than most school characteristics. However, he did find a substantial association between student body characteristics, similar to those examined earlier by the status attainment researchers, and student achievement. Of note, he found that the achievement of minority students was highest in racially integrated schools. He argued that this benefit derived "not from racial composition per se but from the better educational background and higher aspirations that are on average found
amongst white students” (Coleman et al. 1966: 307). The wide scale public policy movement to desegregate schools by means of busing was a direct result of this finding. Thus, this research focused on how dissimilarities in student body composition (or contextual attributes of schools) are associated with student achievement.

In another major educational research project, the High School and Beyond study, Coleman and his collaborators focused on disparities in student achievement between public and private schools (Coleman and Hoffer 1987; Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore 1982). They showed that public and private schools differ in course offerings, parental involvement, school organization, discipline, and many other ways that benefit private student achievement. Additionally, Catholic high schools provide significant amounts of social capital to their students, which in turn leads to gains in achievement. Thus, in this research, Coleman and associates focused on how variations in the global attributes of school social structure and the context of public and private school are translated into differences in student achievement.

Coleman’s research emphasizing the relationship between student outcomes and both the global and contextual attributes of schools has fueled an entire generation of researchers bent on the exploration of the influences of schools on students. Sorenson and Morgan (2000: 141, 145) claim that Coleman’s work has impacted policy and research “as no other sociological enterprise” and that it has “defined the basic questions addressed by most other school effects research.”
School effects research, then, is premised on the idea that variation in student outcomes is linked with differences in school characteristics and context. But this need not be the case. A high-achieving, self-motivated student, whose college-educated parents are strongly supportive and heavily involved in their child’s educational pursuits, might set ambitious goals for future educational attainment irrespective of the school attended (Jencks and Mayer 1990).

Furthermore, the nonrandom sorting of students across schools, as described by Coleman (1966) and resulting in distinct student compositions (poor, white, or high achieving, for example), might suggest the existence of differential school effectiveness. However, although few question the existence of high achieving schools, it is possible that school differences in student achievement can be explained solely by the individual characteristics of students once the school composition of these characteristics is considered. This suggests that once pertinent personal information about a student is known, such as socioeconomic status, parental educational attainment, and academic performance, no additional student differentiation by schools is apparent. Thus, the disentanglement of school and family influences is a key feature of research that can identify how schools can influence student outcomes (Jencks and Mayer 1990).

Methodological Considerations

Multilevel regression models have become the standard for estimating the effects of contexts, such as neighborhoods or schools, on individual outcomes including attitudes, behaviors, or academic achievement. With a sample that
has both 1) a sufficient number of schools, and 2) a sufficient number of students within schools, multilevel models can be used to ascertain whether differences in school characteristics account for variation in student outcomes. In attempting to distinguish how school characteristics are related to student outcomes, then, two separate levels of influence, both the individual and the school, must be considered. By comparing academically similar students from similar families, who attended different types of schools, the association between school attributes and student educational goals, for instance, can be examined (Jencks and Mayer 1990).

Because students clustered within schools are not statistically independent observations, traditional linear and binary regression models produce downwardly biased standard errors, which can lead to incorrect inferences about the statistical and substantive importance of school context variables (Guo and Zhao 2000). However, multilevel models explicitly adjust for the nonindependence of sample members who share a higher-order context, such as a school (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). Thus, the primary statistical usage of the term school effects signifies a multilevel modeling strategy that attempts to disentangle individual and school effects on specified student outcomes.

Given that the most often used tool to identify school effects is a form of statistical regression analysis, questions of causality remain major issues in empirical research to discern school effects. The main theoretical underpinnings of this research suggest that school contexts and characteristics can
independently shape and influence student behaviors. However, most research of the school effects genre falls short of this theoretical ideal and is not able to definitively prove an independent causal influence of schools; more modestly, rather, only an association between school characteristics and student outcomes can be established.

Further complicating the matter is the question of adequately capturing all student factors that determine selection into a school. Family characteristics exert a major influence on both children’s academic outcomes and the schools they attend, so that children who attend better schools would differ in some ways from children who attend poor schools even if schools did not influence achievement at all (Jencks and Mayer 1990). In the words of Rutter and colleagues (1979: 181) in a study of school effectiveness, “The question is whether schools were as they were because of the children they admitted or rather whether children behaved in the way they did because of school influences.” This dissertation, then, only points to the possibility of an influence of schools on adolescents through an investigation of the association between school characteristics and student college attitudes, knowledge, and preparation.

Secondary School Effects

Although school characteristics for all enrolled students in a given school are identical, many aspects of high school experience vary by student, such as individual guidance and encouragement given by counselors and teachers. Although these interactions are measured at the level of the student, they take place within the confines of the high school. In other words, each student can
respond to the school climate differently. This depends in part on the motivation and choices of the student and in part on the way school agents perceive and interact with the student. To paraphrase Sorensen and Morgan (2000), I suggest that any formalized and systematically occurring portion of high school that makes a difference for student learning could be described as a school effect. By broadening the description of school effects to include interaction with high school staff, I include a wider variety of high school influences on the college search process and call these secondary school effects. Because these school interactions are measured at the level of the students, multilevel models are not required to estimate their association with students’ expectations and college application behaviors. In this dissertation, I simultaneously examine the association between both types of school effects (global and contextual school characteristics and school interactions) and student precursors to college attendance.

The purpose and mission of schools is to promote student learning, and school effectiveness is often determined by student achievement. In large part, school effects researchers including Coleman have focused on how schools influence achievement (Sorensen and Morgan 2000). Less attention has been given to other student outcomes of interest, including student preparation for college. In this dissertation, then, I simultaneously consider the association between individual student and school characteristics and specific stages through which they must pass to guarantee college enrollment. Specifically, I
investigate the relationship between 1) school racial composition and students’
educational goals; 2) student interactions with high school guidance counselors,
counseling department college orientation, and student knowledge of college
admissions policies and standards; 3) parental characteristics and guidance
counselor assistance with college applications. Texas provides an ideal location
for this analysis. The geographical diversity of residents in the state across class
and ethnic lines has resulted in a wide range of school environments.
Furthermore, recent changes to Texas college admissions policies have resulted
in a shifting of the higher-education landscape for the thousands of students
attending high school in the state. It is to a further description of this unique
research site that I now turn.

**Texas as a Research Context**

In 1996, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, in *Hopwood vs. University of
Texas*, ruled that race could not be used as a factor in determining college
admissions. In response, the Texas legislature passed H.B. 588, popularly
known as the top ten percent law, guaranteeing admission to any public
university for all high school students who graduated in the top ten percent of
their class. In practice, the two public flagship universities of the state, University
of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M, have been the most heavily affected by this
change in college admissions policy.

As part of a college enrollment strategy beginning in 1998, then,
knowledgeable students who could attain a position in the top ten percent of their
graduating class, at the end of their junior year or during either semester of their
senior year, were assured admission to top Texas public universities. This policy, embedded in the vast higher education landscape of Texas, provides the backdrop for the higher education decisions of the majority of Texas high school graduates.

In enacting this law, the Texas legislature sought a race-neutral alternative to affirmative action that would result in the continued admission of racial minority students in similar proportions to those attained pre-1996. This success of this goal, however, depends on the racial segregation of students in schools throughout the state (Tienda and Niu 2006), which is possible in Texas due to the racial and ethnic concentration of minorities in regions and within cities.

This is shown by examining the population characteristics of the state by region. Dividing the state into four quadrants as in Figure 1.1, each region manifests distinctive characteristics, illustrated by Table 1.1. Constituting a third of state residents and maintaining substantial proportions in each geographical area, the statewide Hispanic population reaches 40% in the southwest, an area which houses a relatively large number of immigrants, many of them illegal. This concentration increases to over three-quarters when examining counties that share the western border with Mexico. As an further indicator of Hispanic concentration, almost 60% of residents in the southwest speak a second language. The bulk of the state’s black and Asian residents reside in the eastern half of the state, with the most racial diversity found in the southeast where Austin, Houston, and San Antonio are located. With its residents being 35%
Hispanic, 13% black, and 3% Asian, the racial makeup in the southeast parallels the overall composition in the state as a whole.

Figure 1.1 Texas geographical regions.
Table 1.1. Texas population characteristics by geographical region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Texas</th>
<th>Northeast</th>
<th>Northwest</th>
<th>Southeast</th>
<th>Southwest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total population (1,000)</strong></td>
<td>20,852</td>
<td>6,664</td>
<td>1,077</td>
<td>11,127</td>
<td>1,952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Immigration and Language</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion foreign born</td>
<td>0.139</td>
<td>0.128</td>
<td>0.059</td>
<td>0.145</td>
<td>0.185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion who speak 2nd language</td>
<td>0.312</td>
<td>0.210</td>
<td>0.235</td>
<td>0.339</td>
<td>0.571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Racial/Ethnic Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion white</td>
<td>0.524</td>
<td>0.619</td>
<td>0.649</td>
<td>0.480</td>
<td>0.536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion black</td>
<td>0.115</td>
<td>0.133</td>
<td>0.057</td>
<td>0.125</td>
<td>0.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion Hispanic</td>
<td>0.320</td>
<td>0.206</td>
<td>0.272</td>
<td>0.352</td>
<td>0.405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion Asian</td>
<td>0.027</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>0.030</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational Attainment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion with less than 9th grade education</td>
<td>0.115</td>
<td>0.085</td>
<td>0.112</td>
<td>0.121</td>
<td>0.201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion with high school degree or higher</td>
<td>0.757</td>
<td>0.792</td>
<td>0.743</td>
<td>0.750</td>
<td>0.659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion with bachelor's degree or higher</td>
<td>0.232</td>
<td>0.257</td>
<td>0.181</td>
<td>0.235</td>
<td>0.162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socioeconomic Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income, 1999 dollars</td>
<td>39,927</td>
<td>45,045</td>
<td>32,470</td>
<td>40,033</td>
<td>31,240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion under poverty line</td>
<td>0.120</td>
<td>0.089</td>
<td>0.126</td>
<td>0.128</td>
<td>0.190</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Census 2000 Summary File 1 (SF 1) 100-Percent Data, Texas Counties
Residents in the southwest tend to be both the poorest and least educated in the state. 20% of residents here have not attained a 9th grade education, compared to 12% in the state overall, and median household income in the region is 80% of the state average. Educational attainment and income are also lower in the rural northwest region than in the state as a whole. The northeast, including the Dallas/Fort Worth area, has the highest median income of all regions and is the location of several of the state’s richest counties. This area also has the greatest concentration of college graduates. However, the southeast closely trails the northeast with respect to income and education.

These regional differences in race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status are reflected in Texas high schools. Using 2002 data from the Texas Education Agency, Table 1.2 illustrates this diversity with selected school characteristics. The sample contains school-level data from a total of 1,141 high schools with total enrollments of 30 or more students and that enroll only high school students.¹ I highlight the minimums and maximums for selected high school characteristics in order to illustrate the wide variation among Texas high schools. Some students attend schools that enroll no minority students or no economically disadvantaged students. Others contain almost all black or Hispanic students, or fully 100% of students qualify for free/reduced priced lunches. While in some high schools, no students met state achievement standards as measured by assessments of Texas sophomores, other schools exist where all enrolled

¹ A full 20% of schools that educate high school students, including schools with typical 9-12 grade spans as well as K-12, and many other configurations, report total enrollment of fewer than 30 students. These are excluded from my descriptive analysis in order to avoid weighting results with schools that have very few students. An additional 33% of schools with enrollments more than 30 also enrolled younger students.
students passed an end of the course algebra exam. Table 1.2 also shows the wide school variation in teacher experience, availability of counselor resources, and the proportion of limited English proficiency students. Means are also provided in Table 1.2 to provide a sense of average school attributes. Additionally, I include the coefficient of variation to provide another sense of the dispersion of these school characteristics.

Table 1.2. Texas 2002 high school characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Coefficient of Variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>School size</strong></td>
<td>927</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4632</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Racial Composition</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion white</td>
<td>49.8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion black</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>98.1</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion Hispanic</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion Asian</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language Ability</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion limited English proficiency</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socioeconomic Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion economically disadvantaged</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Staff Characteristics</strong></td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students served per counselor</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>5140</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years teacher experience</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Achievement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion passing end of course Algebra exam</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>99.2</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion passing end of course English exam</td>
<td>66.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion meeting state standards on all areas of state assessment</td>
<td>84.1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample Size: 1141


1 I include only schools that enroll 30 or more students and schools without students below 9th grade

These schools at the edges of the distribution are clearly the extreme cases, and represent a minority of Texas high schools. However, such wide heterogeneity among schools increases the potential that schools' independent effects on student outcomes can be identified. With many different configurations of student composition, school resources, school climate, and staff ability, formal statistical methodology can be used to test what factors may account for apparent differences in Texas student outcomes by schools.
The data that I use to address my research questions comes from one primary source, the Texas Higher Education Opportunity Project (THEOP), a longitudinal survey of Texas high school students, which was designed to gather information about how the top 10% law influenced minority enrollment at the state’s public institutions of higher education. Baseline data was collected in the spring of 2002 from a representative sample of Texas public school sophomore and seniors within 98 high schools. Essential for the purposes of this dissertation, this survey asked senior respondents about their future plans and educational goals, the college applications they had submitted, their university preferences, their perceptions of college admissions requirements and standards, and the nature of their interactions with high school counselors and teachers. I use only the baseline data collected from the senior cohort for this empirical analysis.

**Chapter Overview**

In Chapter 2, I examine variation across schools in students’ educational expectations to graduate from a 4-year university. Student desire to attend and complete college is an essential first step to an eventual university degree and corresponds to the first stage of Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith’s (1989) college search process. Figure 1.2 shows the average proportion of students expecting to attain a 4-year college degree, by school. Ranging from 20% to 90%, this figure shows that a substantial amount of between-school variation
exists in students’ educational ambitions and suggests that an examination into the relationship between school attributes and expectations would be fruitful.

Figure 1.2. Average expectation by school, seniors.

![Figure 1.2](image)

SOURCE: THEOP 2002

Specifically, this chapter analyzes possible explanations for the association between school racial composition and educational expectations. Although the racial/ethnic makeup of a student body is an important school descriptor, its direct significance for academic outcomes is questionable. School racial composition could act as a proxy for individual characteristics that directly shape expectations to complete college and are clustered by school. Second, it is also possible that school effects are present, but that the distribution of students by race/ethnicity across school reflects other school characteristics that are related to the level of educational expectations within a school, such as
academic climate emphasizing preparation for college. Finally, the prospect exists that something fundamental about racial composition of schools is directly associated with students’ educational goals. I evaluate the relative contribution of these three mechanisms on the variation in students’ educational expectations across schools. I find that school characteristics are associated with student educational goals. Additionally, results suggest the counterintuitive finding that when comparing similar schools, greater concentrations of minority students are associated with an increased likelihood of students in those schools expecting to attain a 4-year college degree.

In Chapter 3, I explore the relationship between contact with high school guidance counselors and the knowledge students have of essential college admissions information. My primary focus is on students’ interactions with counselors (secondary school effects). By using refined measures of student-counselor interaction and counselor encouragement, this chapter extends previous work on whether and how counselors are associated with students’ abilities to find and apply to appropriate universities. I find that both exposure to and encouragement from high school guidance counselors are related to student knowledge about the college admissions environment.

The top 10% law discussed earlier is a key feature of Texas higher education, and student understanding of this college admissions policy enables students to make informed decisions about where they will attend college. Student knowledge of the top 10% is one dependent variable in this chapter, and Figure 1.3 shows the average proportion of students, by school, with this
knowledge. Again, large differences between schools (ranging from 0% to 90%) suggest the potential for formalized modeling of the relationship between school characteristics and student knowledge of college admissions policies and standards. Thus, in Chapter 3, I also examine how a school counseling department’s orientation towards college preparation and attendance (school characteristics) are associated with the likelihood that students understand the new university admissions policy and university admissions standards. I find that in addition to the effect of students’ personal interactions with counselors, school counseling focus is also related to their knowledge of college admissions policies and standards.

**Figure 1.3. School average of students who know about the Top 10% Law**

![Histogram showing the proportion of students who know about the Top 10% Law](image)

SOURCE: THEOP 2002
In Chapter 4, I focus on the second stage of college search (Hossler et al. 1989) by asking how much contact college bound students have with counselors for assistance with college application materials. This chapter explores the relationship between parental characteristics and attitudes and the amount of application help counselors give by examining whether counselors act to reinforce or replace parental predispositions and abilities. Stated as a question, are college bound students whose parents provide application support and help more or less likely to obtain counselor assistance than similar students whose parents are not as supportive? Findings indicate that counselors are more likely to provide guidance to students whose parents are also assisting with applications and who have strong pro-educational attitudes, thus playing a reinforcing role.
Figure 1.4 shows the average number of student visits to a counselor for application assistance by school, and again suggests potential for exploring school effects. Therefore, I examine whether school characteristics are associated with counselor exposure and whether the relationship between parental characteristics and counselor application assistance is different among schools that strongly emphasize college preparation compared with schools where there is less emphasis on college preparation. I find some evidence that school climate is related to the amount of counselor application assistance, and that more academic school settings are associated with decreased disparities in counselor contact.
Conclusion

At a time when college enrollment rates for low-income and minority students are below those of both their richer and white and Asian counterparts, policies and practices designed to increase university access have been a priority for high schools. The unique placement of high schools between the secondary and post-secondary educational spheres makes them prime candidates to assist students in their transition to college. Although much research in the school effects tradition has considered the influence of schools on learning and achievement, relatively little has examined the association between high school characteristics and the attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors that enable students to enroll in college, which are the focus of this dissertation.

Policy makers, in recognizing the importance of both overall college attendance and improved access for certain groups, have spent a great deal of time, effort, and money in various high school reform strategies designed to help students enroll in college. Properly executed contextual analyses of the way individual student behaviors are related to and shaped by schools are especially important in the evaluation of school reform strategies. As researchers advance theoretical frameworks of how schools shape student behavior, extend understanding of the mechanisms of school influence, and improve methodological tools and their usage, policy oriented sociologists are well positioned to inform public policy that can influence student ability to pursue a college education.


