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The Way I See It: An Exploration of College Preparation and Student Aspirations in Mississippi Public High Schools

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THE WAY I SEE IT:
AN EXPLORATION OF COLLEGE PREPARATION AND STUDENT ASPIRATIONS IN MISSISSIPPI HIGH SCHOOLS

By Christine Nicole Dickason

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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ABSTRACT

CHRISTINE NICOLE DICKASON: The Way I See It: An Exploration of College Preparation and Student Aspirations in Mississippi High Schools

(Under the Direction of Dr. Melissa Bass)

The Way I See It, conducted with a peer, Kaitlyn Barton, explores college preparation and student aspirations in Mississippi public high schools. In order to gain a thorough understanding of college preparation and student aspirations in the state, we decided to split the thesis into three main components: 1) a survey, distributed to juniors at three high schools in Mississippi, to collect quantitative data; 2) a documentary film, to delve into the qualitative, human side of the issue; and, 3) the written thesis. In my written thesis, I focused on issues of college preparation. Overall, Mississippi high school students are not pushed to take rigorous courses; lack the knowledge and skills needed to succeed on standardized tests; and are uninformed about the college application process. I conclude that the state of Mississippi as a whole has much work to do to ensure that all students are prepared for some form of post-secondary education. I recommend that Mississippi continue the implementation of Common Core State Standards; create an intervention program to address individual accountability on the ACT; and invest in college counselors that can assist students with the college preparation and application process.
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I. Introduction

As a freshman entering college at the University of Mississippi, I never imagined embarking on a journey to complete a project that would so drastically impact my life. The project was born from a simple conversation with my best friend and roommate, Kaitlyn Barton. We didn’t understand how to effectively study for college exams. What especially stood out is that we had both attended top high schools in our states—Tennessee and Mississippi. Therefore, if we believed ourselves to be unprepared in certain aspects, what about students who were graduating from high schools much worse than ours?

This question, coupled with the lucky placement of a poster advertising a film competition, led to our ultimate decision to explore college preparation and student aspirations in public high schools in the state of Mississippi. Throughout the process of “tailoring” our specific thesis topic, Kaitlyn and I remained committed to an overall theme of student voice. Too often, we found, the people talking about the topic of college preparation and student aspirations were far removed from the actual classrooms where all this is taking place. We strongly believed—and still do—that students should be asked about their experiences while they are living through the college preparatory process. From the students’ stories, opinions, and ideas, we have learned so much, and we hope that future projects will take a similar route in ensuring that student voice is taken into account.

In order to gain a thorough understanding of college preparation and student aspirations in the state, we decided to split the thesis into three main components: 1) a survey, to collect quantitative data; 2) a documentary film, to delve into the qualitative,
human side of the issue; and, 3) the written thesis, which you are reading now. The first two sections were completed collaboratively; the third part was written individually. Within each component, Kaitlyn and I focused on different aspects of the research topic—I focused on college preparation, and she on student aspirations. Each part of our thesis has allowed us to see the topic in a different way. In fact, the interaction between the quantitative data—both what we studied in our literature review and collected in our survey—and the stories we heard from students during filming has been remarkable and illuminating.

The project has been a long and sometimes emotional one. We have seen a mother break down crying while speaking about some of her daughter’s struggles in school. We have listened to a student describe the hopelessness of his small, rural town—and how education is the key to getting out. Through it all, however, we have learned so much. For me, the project has reaffirmed my belief that every student should be prepared for college-level work. Yet, over the past few years, I have concluded that we are failing our students in this, as too many of Mississippi’s students are unable to reach simple benchmarks in tests and often willingly profess a lack of preparation for succeeding at the college level.

I begin my thesis with a literature review that explores the existing body of research on the topic of college preparation. In 2012, 66 percent of U.S. high school graduates went on to attend college.¹ Yet I found that many studies, using a variety of factors, concluded that students lack the necessary preparation to complete college-level coursework. This is clear in the high rates of remediation in colleges across the country.

Throughout my research, I have encountered numerous, and sometimes conflicting, definitions of what it means to be college ready. This is something I also tried to grapple with in my literature review. For the purpose of my thesis, I define college readiness as demonstrated rigor in high school coursework, completion of appropriate college entrance exams, and knowledge of and capacity to follow through with the demanding college application and financial aid processes. I believe this definition has the advantage of being prospective—that is, it is measurable before a student arrives at college.

Next, I explain the methodology of the survey we distributed, as well as data that stood out to me from the survey. The survey was completed by second semester juniors at three high schools in Mississippi that were randomly selected: Magee High School, Northwest Rankin High School, and Leland High School. Because of a low response rate at Magee High School, the survey data section focuses on Northwest Rankin High School and Leland High School, individually.

After this section, I explain the methodology of the interviews and focus groups and the data from those conversations. Filming students’ and professionals’ views on college preparation and student aspirations allowed us to gain a more personal, qualitative understanding to the research we were doing. From hours of footage, I have taken key quotes from our interviews and organized them into seven main categories: 1) Student Voice, 2) Mississippi and the Community, 3) Policy, 4) Expectations, 5) College Preparation, 6) Student Aspirations, and 7) The Big Question: Should all students go to college?

I then discuss how the survey and the filming work together to point towards certain findings and policy recommendations. My discussion and policy
recommendations focus on three central issues raised throughout the thesis: lack of high expectations and rigorous coursework for students; preparation for and success in standardized testing; and information about navigating the college application process.

Finally, the conclusion sums up the thesis, as well as offer possible next steps for me or other interested parties to take in order to continue the work started in this thesis. Most importantly, I stress the need for further education policy research projects to incorporate student voice.
II. Literature Review

College Preparation

I. Introduction

For most students, graduating from high school is a huge achievement and proud accomplishment: but what is next? For about 66 percent of 2012 U.S. high school graduates, college is the next step. Yet, are those graduates prepared for the challenges of college? Research suggests a lack of preparation. Several indicators contribute to this conclusion, including “high rates of remediation, stagnant rates of college completion, and more time to degree completion.” Moreover, for the approximately 34 percent of students who have decided not to attend college, is this due to a lack in preparation in their high schools or other factors? The purpose of this literature review is to explore the current knowledge that is available regarding the preparation of high school students for a college education. The literature review informs my research and helps to answer the question: are Mississippi high school students prepared for college-level coursework?

II. Defining College Preparation

The first stumble one encounters when writing about or researching this topic is clearly defining “college preparation.” Is there an “ideal student” that represents what it means to

be college-ready? A study conducted in 2003 by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research attempts to answer this question by seeking to “estimate…the percentage that finish high school ready to attend a four-year university.” It drew from existing data sources, including the Current Population Survey (CPS), the United States Department of Education’s Common Core of Data (CCD), the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the NAEP Transcript Study, the United States Census Bureau, and the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS). The study also included original data, which the authors believed was important in order to accurately represent the schools and students, as well as to disprove any past research that was in error. The original data was found by using the Greene Method, which approximated high school graduation rates and college readiness rates.

The authors begin by defining college readiness as “…whether students have the bare minimum qualifications necessary before a college will even consider their applications.” They also offer their own college readiness rate, which they estimated through the use of three screens: high school graduation, student transcripts, and reading skills. Using this process, the authors found that only 32 percent of all graduating high school students passed their screening, and were thus, prepared for college.

5 See http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_baeo.htm for an in-depth explanation of the Greene Method when it was first introduced.
7 Ibid.
The authors explain why their college readiness rate is more accurate than others that have been suggested. To do so, they identify the factors and indicators that demonstrate adequate college preparation. The researchers acknowledge that many other college readiness rates consider how many freshmen at four-year universities have to take remedial courses in order to be successful with college coursework. While they note that remediation rates are important in seeing how many students will graduate from college, they note that this estimation alone fails to consider the students who did not make it to college because they were not prepared. In other words, students who are in remedial courses in college did at least exhibit the bare minimum qualifications to be considered for acceptance.

Another factor the study considers, but ultimately dismisses, is test scores because, in most cases, students must take an entrance exam (typically the ACT or SAT), also known as “high stakes testing,” to be admitted to a college. The authors conclude that although scores on achievement tests measure some skills necessary for college, “this information alone doesn’t tell us enough to adequately measure how many students are college-ready in every way that they need to be.”

Next, the study mentions the attempt by some researchers to quantify the level of college preparation of high school students. The National Center for Education Statistics created a college-preparedness index. The index uses five indicators to determine a student’s

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score: “grade point average in academic courses, class rank, score on the NELS test (an aptitude test), SAT score, and ACT score.” Once again, the authors reject this measurement, claiming that the level required for these indicators to declare a student college-ready are simply too low and do not realistically reflect college admission requirements. Thus, after examining the alternative ways to determine college readiness as offered by multiple sources, the authors conclude that their rate—using the three screens of high school graduation, students transcripts, and reading skills—is most accurate and comprehensive.

Although the Greene study presents interesting considerations regarding the definition of college preparation, it has limitations, including a reliance on approximations and multiple variables, a subjective and rather ambiguous definition of the term “college readiness,” and unforeseen changes in enrollment data. The study’s conclusions have been challenged by, and contradict, many other studies that argue that some of the indicators the Manhattan Institute’s study rejected are useful tools in determining college readiness. A study by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education concluded, “factors such as teacher quality and rigorous course-taking in high school are important in promoting effective student preparation for college.” In the Greene study, there is a lack of any emphasis on the importance of the teacher’s abilities and how that impacts student success. The study by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher

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Education also suggests the number of students who take remedial courses in college reflects their level of college preparation. It cites the U.S. Department of Education’s research that finds “more than half of students entering college are required to take remedial courses, many in several subjects.”

A paper prepared for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation defined proper college preparation and readiness as, “The level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed— without remediation—in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program.” Thus, the remedial courses needed by more than half of college freshmen would indicate that those college freshmen are not college-ready, according to this paper’s standards.

The Center for American Progress (CAP), defines “postsecondary readiness” as “a student’s ability to complete a transfer-level course in core subject areas at a two- or four-year post-secondary institution with a C or better and move on to the next course in the sequence without remediation.” The definition offered by CAP closely resembles the one from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which may signal that ability to

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complete a college-level course in a core subject area is a key component of determining college readiness.

Other research indicates the importance of a “college climate” in high schools. The Consortium on Chicago School Research asserted:

> Across all our analyses, the single most consistent predictor of whether students took steps toward college enrollment was whether their teachers reported that their high school had a strong college climate, that is, they and their colleagues pushed students to go to college, worked to ensure that students would be prepared, and were involved in supporting students in completing their college applications.\(^\text{14}\)

This idea of a “college climate” is prevalent in the current literature available regarding college preparation. It may be so popular because it combines many different factors into one key term—factors including teacher quality and the social environment in a school, to name a few.

From just the few examples given in this paper, it is clear that there are differing yet well-informed opinions on the definition of college readiness. Herein lies one of the main issues surrounding this topic: there is no definitive consensus on what being prepared and ready for college actually means. However, I would argue that all of the separate factors that each of these studies point to as important can be seen as pieces of a complete picture. While there may be strong disagreement on which factors are most crucial to

preparing students for college, there is at least a general idea of what factors may be considered as the most influential. The current literature available does not provide a complete understanding of the topic; yet, it does provide a solid base from which to build. For the purposes of this thesis, I will define college readiness as demonstrated rigor in high school coursework, completion of appropriate college entrance exams, and knowledge of and capacity to follow through with the demanding college application and financial aid processes.

III. Standardized Testing

In order to build on the base of current knowledge, it is useful to consider several of the indicators used by the various studies previously described to understand the extent to which high school students are being prepared for college. Perhaps one of the most widely used guides for college preparation is standardized testing. The ACT offers college readiness benchmark scores in each subject area for every student who takes the test. While these scores do not take into account many other important factors regarding college preparation, they can offer some general idea about the status of high school students’ level of preparation. In the ACT Profile Report of the graduating class of 2013, only 26 percent of students nationwide met the benchmark score in all four categories of the test, which include English, Math, Reading, and Science. In the state of Mississippi, only 12 percent of students taking the ACT met the benchmark score in all four categories of the test.\(^\text{15}\) This number is extremely low, especially compared to the already abysmal national average, and indicates that there is a dearth of preparation for college,

especially in Mississippi high schools.

This thesis will build upon the current knowledge base by asking students in-depth questions about preparation for these standardized tests—both offered through their school or different sources—and timing of the test, such as when they first took the ACT.

IV. Effects of College Preparation (Or Lack Thereof)

Another interesting way to examine college preparation is through questioning those who are most affected by college preparation (or lack thereof). *Rising to the Challenge: A Study of Recent High School Graduates, College Instructors, and Employers* assisted in determining whether or not high school graduates are prepared for immediate entry into either an institution of higher learning or the workforce. The authors of this study “interviewed 1,487 public high school graduates from the classes of 2002, 2003, and 2004.”[^16] They also spoke with 300 college professors who teach freshman students at both two- and four-year colleges. The study found that “two in five recent high school graduates say that there are gaps between the education they received in high school and the overall skills, abilities, and work habits that are expected of them today in college and in the workforce.”[^17] Moreover, the research showed that 94 percent of high school graduates “believe that providing opportunities to take more challenging courses such as

[^17]: Ibid.
honors, AP, or IB classes would improve their preparation for life after graduation.”

The report adds that college instructors are just as discouraged, if not more so, by the lack of preparation high school graduates seem to have. In fact, the study reported:

Large majorities of instructors are dissatisfied with the job public schools are doing in preparing students for college when it comes to writing quality (62%) and their ability to read and comprehend complex materials (70%). Majorities of instructors are dissatisfied with their students’ preparation in a number of other areas, including their ability to think analytically (66%), their work and study habits (65%), their ability to do research (59%), applying what they learn to solve problems (55%), and mathematics (52%).

This study in particular shows that students lack preparation in several areas that are necessary for success in college.

My thesis will draw on teachers’ experiences, both at the high school and college level, to better understand how they see this lack of preparation manifested in their classes. Moreover, I will specifically ask students if they felt challenged in their high school and what their school could offer that would better prepare them for post-high school success.

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19 Ibid.
V. Communication Between Secondary and Postsecondary Education Institutions

One problem for many students is the discrepancy between what one needs to graduate from high school and what is needed to enter college. While a student may successfully meet the coursework requirements to graduate from high school, for example, he or she may still lack the necessary courses to even be considered for acceptance into a certain college. *Claiming Common Ground: State Policymaking for Improving College Readiness and Success*, a study conducted in 2006 by The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, finds that “much of the coursework in high school does not build toward college readiness.”²⁰ For example, a student may be required to take only three science classes in high school, yet he or she may have needed to have taken four science classes in order to gain entry to the college of his or her choice.

The call for increased communication between secondary and postsecondary educational institutions, which is noted in *Claiming Common Ground*, is a recurring theme in much of the literature. Lack of communication results in graduation requirements that are not aligned with entry-level college requirements, little to no data regarding the achievements of high school graduates, and assessments that vary between (and within) state borders.²¹ The same 2012 *Achieve* report indicated that only 18 states currently have policy allowing college- and career-ready (CCR) assessments to be administered to all high

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school students. Mississippi was not one of those states. However, Mississippi is in the process of developing such a policy, which would require schools to administer the ACT to all students.\textsuperscript{22} While this is a step in the right direction, it is not enough. Simply requiring all students to take the ACT does not ensure positive outcomes; students must also be provided with the proper preparation and support so they can be successful on the exam. In student interviews, I asked whether or not students felt that their high schools provided the necessary means of support to do well on the ACT or SAT.

VI. Common Core Standards and Other Attempts at Coursework Alignment

States have made improvements in aligning coursework with higher education requirements since the release of many of these studies. The biggest factor in this trend across the nation is the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), which is led by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). According to the CCSSI’s website, the initiative is a “state-led effort that established a single set of clear educational standards for kindergarten through 12\textsuperscript{th} grade in English language arts and mathematics that states voluntarily adopt.”\textsuperscript{23}

The standards provide schools with guidelines and benchmarks that help to ensure that students will graduate prepared for college or other opportunities after high school. As stated above, the Common Core State standards only provide benchmarks for


It is also important to note that these are simply standards, not curricula. Therefore, it is still the responsibility of the local school districts to select or create curricula that meet the standards provided by the CCSSI.

These standards have been specifically designed to work towards more college-ready high school graduates, as the standards were designed to “reflect research on college and career readiness.” The CCSSI defined college-readiness as sufficient preparation to be ready for “credit-bearing course work in two- or four-year colleges, without the need for remediation and with a strong chance for earning credit toward a designated degree program.” The policymakers behind CCSSI sought advice from “Achieve, ACT, and the College Board to craft the anchor standards.”

As of 2014, forty-three states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity have adopted the Common Core State Standards. Despite some misunderstanding by the general public, the states have adopted these standards without any coercion from the federal government, meaning that they did not have to adopt the Common Core State Standards in order to quality for grants from

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24 See [http://www.corestandards.org/Math](http://www.corestandards.org/Math) for the complete Mathematics standards.
25 See [http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy) for the complete English Language Arts Standards.
the Race to the Top program.\textsuperscript{29} There has been significant pushback from individuals and organizations claiming that the CCSSI is not the answer to the nation’s education woes. Some of the criticisms focus on the standards themselves. For example, many fear that the English standards call for less classic literature and more non-fiction reading.\textsuperscript{30}

Even if the standards are well written, they must also be implemented correctly. An Achieve report stated that successful implementation of the standards requires “aligning instructional materials and curricular units to the CCSS; conducting highly effective professional development; and redesigning data, assessment and accountability systems to reflect the expectations in the CCSS.”\textsuperscript{31} Another paper, from the Center on Education Policy, emphasizes that adoption of the standards means little in terms of advancing student achievement. For real change to occur, “states and school districts, as well as teachers and school leaders, must make complementary changes in curriculum, instruction, assessment, teacher professional development, and other areas.”\textsuperscript{32} Yet, “twenty-one states cite resource issues” as a impediment to fully implementing the


standards.”

Other reports point to the inadequacies in state policymaking to bridge K-12 and higher education. A 2011 report from the Center on Education Policy surveyed a total of thirty-six state education departments to see if their states were aligning undergraduate admission requirements with the Common Core State Standards. Only eight of the respondents said yes—four said no, and twenty-four responded that they did not know.

Despite the critiques, some organizations have taken the general principles used in developing the CCSSI to create standards in areas besides mathematics and English. For example, the National Research Council, the National Science Teachers Association, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and Achieve are collaborating to create the Next Generation Science Standards Project (NGSS). The process is designed to create a “new K-12 science standards…that will be rich in content and practice, arranged in a coherent manner across disciplines and grades to provide all students an internationally benchmarked science education.” While the final standards have not yet been released, the initiative asked for comments from collaborators and other stakeholders—and has received some negative reviews. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, while hopeful about the final draft, concluded that “only states with

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exceptionally weak science standards of their own would likely benefit from replacing them with these ‘next-generation’ standards.”

From the criticisms of these initiatives, it seems that there is still work to be done when attempting to align coursework between secondary and postsecondary educational institutions. Furthermore, some alignments only apply to a specific state, limiting students to in-state public universities due to the misalignment of the credit requirements of their high school and the credit requirements to enter other states’ universities. Even within some states, there remain ambiguities about specific requirements. For example, Mississippi high school seniors graduating in the 2011-12 school year and later are required to have completed four units of science, which must include Biology I. The number of required units exceeds the number required by Mississippi’s College Preparatory Curriculum (CPC). However, the CPC requires that students have two laboratory based science courses; the high school graduation requirements do not.

The disconnect present between high school coursework and college requirements remains a barrier for many students considering college. A national system of high school

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38 The College Preparatory Curriculum (CPC) is set by the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning, which include eight universities in the state of Mississippi. The universities use the CPC as guidelines for admitting Mississippi High School graduates.

graduation requirements and college entrance requirements would alleviate these concerns. It would also allow more students from Mississippi to be prepared to attend college in Texas, California, Georgia, or any other state’s public universities. More options for students means greater access to college, as well as the ability for a student to choose the university they wish to attend, rather than being cornered into one college.

My thesis will build upon the current research about Common Core Standards by asking teachers in select Mississippi high schools their attitudes towards the standards and how successful (or not) the implementation of these standards has been in the classroom. I will also ask educators and other professionals whether or not they believe that increased communication is needed between K-12 schools and institutions of higher learning, specifically as that relates to alignment of requirements.

VII. Tracking and Barriers to AP Courses

The issues surrounding college preparedness are widespread and are crippling students’ abilities to succeed across the country. Problems of college preparation only deepen when looking at minority students or students who are living in poverty. An article in The Seattle Times asserted, “Leaders in the K-16 movement say it is a matter of social justice. Upper-middle-class students are more likely than low-income students to take the rigorous classes they need for college success, according to Education Trust, which traces the problem to "tracking" in high schools.”

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One study defined the practice of tracking as “assigning students to instructional groups on the basis of ability.” 41 Tracking is a major concern of many education policy experts, as it predetermines the outcome of a student’s education by placing the individual onto a certain track, or path, that leads to a specific end result like being prepared for college or vocational training. In some cases, a student is placed on a “general track,” which may not lead to a specific result at all. To be clear, I am focusing on the issue of tracking students into specific classes, rather than the practice of grouping students based on ability within a class.

An article in the Stanford University News Service in 1994 warned of the consequences that tracking students has, especially for those students who fall in the middle categories of achievement. 42 The most severe consequence of tracking occurs when students’ opportunities are limited. Sanford Dornbusch, the Stanford professor who studied the effects of tracking, said that he found students who had intended to attend college, yet many of them had been placed in tracks that were not intended for college preparation, thus leaving them without the necessary requirements for college.

The possibility of placing students on track below their level of ability occurs more frequently for minority students. Dornbusch writes, “Eighth grade test scores are critical to a students' high school placement, yet many who do well on those tests - particularly

Latino and African American students in the Northern California schools studied - are misplaced in courses below their abilities.” As a result, these students also are not being prepared for college.

The problem was much more persistent and prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s, until a surge in what is known as the de-tracking movement. This movement challenged the idea that students should be set on certain tracks based on perceived ability or performance. Its advocates assert that all students, rather than a select few, should be exposed to a challenging curriculum. Yet tracking has not disappeared. In fact, “a 2000 survey of all 174 public high schools in Maryland reported that two-thirds of the high schools used tracking in the four core subject areas.”

Limiting the accessibility of honors, Advanced Placement (AP), dual credit, and International Baccalaureate (IB) classes can be an indirect effect of tracking. Many high schools have a list of requirements that a student must fulfill before they can enroll in these advanced classes. For example, at Jackson Public Schools in Mississippi, students must pass through a number of screens, including high scores on state subject area tests.

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45 Dual credit classes offer an opportunity for students to receive high school and college credit for a local college or university. Dual credit classes use the syllabi, textbooks, and assessments of the college classes. This credit may or may not transfer to another institution of higher learning. AP credit, on the other hand, is generally accepted at most institutions around the country and is monitored by the College Board.
and a letter of commitment signed by the student and parents.\textsuperscript{46} If students have been placed on a track that does not require test prep courses, then they might not achieve the necessary scores to be placed in an AP class. These barriers limit the accessibility of AP classes, thus putting some students on a track to success while others are left behind.

A report conducted by the Tennessee Department of Education in 2014 on AP success (or lack thereof) concluded that the following barriers existed: low preparation, low access, low enrollment, differential enrollment, low test-taking, and differential test-taking.\textsuperscript{47} If students are not prepared for AP courses, then they will not be able to access them. If they cannot access the classes, then there will be low enrollment. Even if some students do enroll in the AP courses, there are many who do not take the AP test at the conclusion of the class, costing them valuable college credit. There may be a number of reasons why students do not take the test, including a lack of awareness about the tests or a feeling of under-preparedness for success on the tests. The study noted that economically disadvantaged students were much less likely to enroll in an AP class—and as stated above, low-income students are also more likely to be underprepared. However, the report framed all of the results around the idea of an “AP Pipeline,” which is problematic, as it once again reflects the idea of tracking.\textsuperscript{48}

The continued use of tracking is an important factor when considering whether or not a


\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
student is prepared for coursework in an institution of higher learning. If a student has been set on an honors path, it may be assumed that he or she will go on to attend college; yet, if that student is set on a path that requires only the bare minimum, the student will be at a disadvantage when faced with the prospects after high school.

To better understand students’ views on tracking, I asked high school seniors whether they feel that high expectations are important for both themselves and others’ success in and after high school. I also asked whether all students are allowed to enter into Advanced Placement courses, and, if not, what the minimum qualifications are for being allowed access to those classes.

VIV. Inequities Due to Financial Status and Race

An article from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, titled “How Colleges Perpetuate Inequality,” (2007) argues that college has become a place only available to those with money. The author of the article, Peter Sacks, supported his claim with facts: “Just 6 percent of students from the lowest-income families earned a bachelor’s degree by age 24 in 1970 and in 2002 still only 6 percent did.”\(^{49}\) While part of the problem is that many students who are prepared for college simply cannot afford it, another disturbing trend has emerged: a direct correlation between income and college preparation. A report published by the *Harvard Press* found that only 11 of every 100 low-income high school

graduates were “very prepared” for college.\textsuperscript{50} One reason for this inequity could be lack of access to college preparatory courses. In fact, “low-income students are less likely to be enrolled in a college preparatory track (28 percent) than medium- or high-income students (49 percent and 65 percent, respectively).”\textsuperscript{51} It is unrealistic and irrational to expect equal outcomes when students do not have equal opportunities.

Not only do inequalities exist due to socioeconomic status, but also with regards to race. One study notes: “Earlier calculations by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, using calculations of graduation rates, high school transcripts and National Assessment of Educational Progress reading scores, found one-third of seniors [college] ready, with white students almost twice as likely as African-American and Hispanic students to be [college] ready.”\textsuperscript{52} Another study concluded that the “public education system disproportionately fails to produce college-ready black and Hispanic graduates,” leading to an underrepresentation of these groups in college.\textsuperscript{53}

The issues of poverty and racial inequality are inextricably connected: it is hard to address one without the other. The sensitivity of these topics make it difficult to directly


address and led me not to ask for income or racial background information on student surveys; however, I gained some insight into students’ lives outside of school, which helps to address these issues. In order to learn more about the students outside of the classroom setting, I asked in the survey and in focus groups how they spend their free time, whether or not they have a job, and if they participate in any extracurricular activities related to the school. While these questions do not directly address the issues of race and poverty, they offer insight into the students’ lives. For example, if a student does not participate in any extracurricular activities, that may point to other responsibilities in their life outside of school—like a job or childcare—or a lack of money to participate in these after-school groups.

X. Possible Solutions

With the long list of obstacles to college preparation and the current statistics about the low levels of preparedness across the country, the situation may seem hopeless. Yet, some education innovators are creating programs that seek to change the current levels of readiness, and thus achievement, which are plaguing the education system. Many researchers have sought to identify which of these programs may be most useful to educators to implement in their own schools.

A study conducted by the New Directions for Institutional Research not only reviewed
current college preparation programs, but also suggested ways to improve them. The data was pre-existing, and the author drew from a variety of sources, including the National Survey of Outreach Programs, the College Board, and the National Center for Education Statistics. The author then compared the existing college preparation programs, such as Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEARUP) and I Have a Dream (IHAD), through a series of charts and graphs.

Through this analysis, the author identified four essential areas for improving high school-based college preparation: expansion of current outreach programs to reach a broader audience, increase in the quality of the programs offered, “expanding opportunities for networking among programs,” and creating a link between preparation programs and the schools that could benefit from them. The research also showed a need for increased research about college preparation programs, as the majority of current evidence supporting them is anecdotal.

One study, *Claiming Common Ground: State Policymaking for Improving College Readiness and Success*, makes specific recommendations for improving college preparation and readiness. It suggests that states should “require K-12 and postsecondary education to align their coursework and assessments…develop the capacity to track students across educational institutions nationwide…[and] publicly report on student

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55 Ibid.
progress and success from high school through postsecondary education.” These recommendations offer state policymakers clear ideas for moving forward in preparing students for life after graduating from high school. The research also includes examples of programs that the authors believe were fulfilling these goals in order to show the possibilities if these recommendations were turned into policy.

Another report, *Improving Academic Preparation for College: What We Know and How State and Federal Policy Can Help*, distinguishes between the role of the federal and state governments and offers specific recommendations for each entity. It emphasizes the need for the federal government to amplify its role in communicating to the public what it means to be college-ready. Additionally, the authors suggest that federal policy could “build states’ capacity to develop and measure students’ college readiness and create incentives and support for innovative college readiness activities that are focused on traditionally underserved students.”

With regards to state policy, the report encourages an increase in the number of policies that focus on student support. Student support programs have been popular with the federal government; for example, the federal TRIO programs—grants used to assist individuals from “disadvantaged backgrounds”—featured a Student Support Services

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Program. This program was designed to “provide opportunities for academic development, assist students with basic college requirements, and to motivate students toward the successful completion of their postsecondary education.” Such programs could include academic tutoring, assistance, and advice when applying for financial aid and completing college applications. Specifically, the authors suggest that the state government develop policies for student support; look for and replicate high school programs that successfully prepare all students for college; enhance data collection and analysis systems; and oversee and evaluate “the implementation of state policies to identify inconsistencies, implementation concerns, and needs for technical assistance.”

The report concludes that preparing students for college is of increasing importance and should be placed at the top of the education policy agenda. The key to increasing college preparation, it suggests, is increased involvement by both the federal government and the state governments. The success of the recommendations suggested in the report is contingent upon proper funding, adequate resources and support, and improved communication between all actors involved in the process.

The current body of research offers a wide range of suggestions for improving college

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58 The Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO) is “designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. See [http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html) for more information.
preparation; yet, the recommendations tend to come from researchers or academics, who are typically disconnected from the high school experience. Thus, through interviews, I asked students for their ideas about improving college readiness. More specifically, I offered students a chance to articulate what they would change about their high school experience that would have better prepared them for the next step.

XI. Conclusion

From the evidence currently available, it seems clear that there is a lack of college preparation in high schools across the country. The research also suggests that preparation, while difficult to define, is necessary for students’ success in college. While the studies attempt to distinguish which indicators are most important in identifying college preparation, they place varying levels of emphasis on a wide range of factors. It appears that a clearer definition of college preparation is needed.

Regardless of what the definition of college preparation is, it is necessary for researchers to continue to explore this topic and suggest ideas for the future so that policymakers can implement legislation that will change the path the country’s education system is on currently. More research is needed on this topic; specifically, studies are needed that collect students’ ideas on what can be done to better prepare them for success at a four-year university. With this information, the federal, state, and local governments would be better equipped to prepare high school students for college. This thesis is focused on filling in that gap in the research: the missing component of student voice.
III. Survey Methodology & Data

Survey Methodology

To conduct our survey, we first needed to select a sample group from our population—Mississippi high school students who were in their second semester of their junior year. We divided the schools in the state into three categories, using the ratings given by the Mississippi Department of Education in 2011: “A-B” schools, “C” schools, and “D-F” schools.

From each category, we randomly selected one school. To complete the random selection, we listed all the schools in each category in an Excel spreadsheet. The schools were each assigned a number. Using Excel, we randomly generated a number. Whichever school corresponded to the number that was generated was our selected school.

For the “A-B” category, it was Magee High School in the Simpson County School District. The “C” school was Northwest Rankin High School in the Rankin County School District. Finally, the selected school for the “D-F” category was Leland High School in the Leland School District. Each school had a different number of high school juniors. Leland had 74; Northwest Rankin had 391; and, Magee had 110.

We decided to distribute the surveys on paper because we did not want to assume that every student had access to a computer to complete it electronically. The survey contained twenty questions, many of which we drew from other surveys that we had encountered during our research. The main source of our questions was The Bridge
Project at Stanford University.\textsuperscript{61} We wanted the survey to be short enough to not impose too large of a burden of time on the students, while at the same time asking a broad enough set of questions to be able to gain some significant knowledge about students’ preparation and aspirations for college. Some questions were simple and asked basic demographic information, such as gender. Others delved into family background (parents’ levels of education achievement) and financial concerns. We added straightforward factual questions about how the students spent their time outside of school, who they talked to about college, and what standardized tests they had taken. The survey was rounded out with broader questions about the purpose of college.

In order to survey a group of students, we had to gain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. We filled out the appropriate forms for our project and received signatures of approval from the Superintendent and Principal at each school. Included in our IRB packet was a consent form that would be used for students, teachers, and any other individuals who participated in the film aspect of our project. After several months and multiple revisions, we finally received IRB approval in March 2013. The IRB approval encompassed our entire thesis, meaning that we were now set to distribute surveys, conduct focus groups, and interview individual students on camera.

Before distributing the survey to the schools, we had several people review our survey for mistakes and possible areas of improvement. In addition to seeking advice from numerous professors, we also contacted two people within the U.S. Department of Navy who specialize in survey creation and evaluation and were able to provide us with feedback. With changes made, we then sent the survey to Collierville High School in

\textsuperscript{61} For more information about The Bridge Project, visit http://stanford.edu/group/bridgeproject/index.html#about.
Collierville, Tennessee to undergo a pilot test with students at this school. The guidance counselor at the school distributed the survey to a few of her student helpers, meaning that the survey was not representative in any way of the entire student body, as the students were not randomly selected. However, the purpose of the pilot test was not to gather results, but rather to ascertain if the questions on the survey were clear to high school students. We received few complaints or indications of any misunderstanding from the students who participated in the pilot.

Again, by this point, we had received consent from the superintendents and principals at each of the selected schools. We were able to establish a contact within each school, with whom we communicated regarding the distribution of the surveys. We worked with these contacts to ensure that the surveys could be distributed during the school day, but at a time that would not interfere with classes, such as during a homeroom or study hall. We mailed boxes of paper copies of the surveys to the three high schools. Each box included instructions for the teachers on how to distribute the surveys, and the contact at each of the schools facilitated the distribution of the materials and assisted teachers with any questions they had. One of the key guidelines provided to the teachers was that they survey was to be anonymous, so no student should write his or her name on the survey. Additionally, the survey was voluntary, and any student could opt out if he or she wished.

One of the first problems we encountered with the survey process was at Magee High School. The principal wanted each student who filled out a survey to have a parent sign a permission form. Under Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, this was
neither required nor encouraged. To keep the surveys anonymous, we did not want to see any student or parent signatures. However, the principal persisted.

In May, we traveled to each school to collect the surveys. Response rates varied widely from the three schools. The chart below shows that while Leland had a nearly 100 percent response rate, Magee only had one of around 10 percent. We suspect that this low response rate was due to the parent permission slip requirement. Due to the low response rate, we do not discuss Magee High School’s responses in our data section.

At the other two schools, students were simply asked to fill out the survey, if they chose to, during their homeroom, which encouraged them to complete it on the spot, rather than take it home and return it to school. This process was much more effective at collecting students’ responses, as seen in the table below. We concluded that, within the boundaries of IRB regulations, the lower the barriers that were placed before students to complete the survey, the higher the response rate.

You’ll notice in Table 1 that the Leland High School response rate appears odd at 105 percent. We were told that there were 74 juniors when we distributed the surveys. Yet we received 78 responses. When we attempted to find the error, the school only suggested that a few students who were not juniors somehow were included in the group of students who took the survey.

The data from the surveys allows us to gain a broad understanding of students’ preparation and aspirations regarding college, as well as shaped the questions we asked later in the focus groups and individual interviews.
Table 1: Response Rates from High Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Magee High School</th>
<th>Northwest Rankin High School</th>
<th>Leland High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of students who responded to survey</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>78*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of students in their junior year at the time of survey distribution</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response rate (percentage)</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>105%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our next step was to enter all the survey data into the computer. At the start, we used Excel. It was tedious work, and we began to worry about how we would draw statistics from the Excel spreadsheets. Thankfully, we had access to an online survey and data analysis program called Qualtrics due to our status as students. During the process of entering the data, we made notes of any surveys that contained errors, such as missing answers. Using Qualtrics analytics, we were able to conduct cross-tabulations and draw other important statistics from the surveys.

Survey Data

The survey began with collecting some basic demographic information. We ended up with 160 male respondents, and 157 female respondents—almost exactly 50 percent from each gender. While 240 of the responses came from Northwest Rankin, only 78 responses were from Leland High School. Yet, while participation from the junior class was about 61 percent at Northwest, it was nearly 100 percent at Leland. Due to the large
difference in size of class between the two schools, the majority of the data will be presented on a school-by-school basis, as the aggregate percentages are heavily skewed towards Northwest Rankin High School.

We began the survey by gathering a general understanding of the academic performance of the students, asking students to self-report their grade point average (GPA). The majority of respondents from both schools had a GPA of 3.0 or higher. No student from either school reported a GPA of 1.4 or lower. However, students at Leland High School (D school) tended to have higher GPAs than students at Northwest Rankin High School (C school), as can be seen in Tables 2 and 3. Consistent with national trends, female respondents were more likely to have a higher GPA.

### Table 2: Overall grade point average (unweighted) of students at Northwest Rankin High School, $n=239$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Point Average</th>
<th>Percent of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.0 and above</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5-3.9</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.0-3.4</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5-2.9</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0-2.4</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5-1.9</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 or lower</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Next, we looked at how many students aspired to attend an institution of higher learning. As you can see in Table 4, 74 percent of students at Northwest Rankin High School (C school) aspired to attend college full-time, while an additional 14 percent hoped to attend college at least part-time.
Students from Leland High School (D school) also aspired to attend college at high rates. In fact, 87 percent of respondents from Leland planned to attend college full-time, a higher percentage than students from Northwest Rankin High School. Female students at both schools aspired to attend college full-time (82 percent) more than male students (72 percent). It is also noteworthy that none of the students from Leland High School indicated that they were undecided in their plans after high school.
The majority of students from both schools (70 percent) were planning to attend a 4-year public college or university, while only 19 respondents said they hadn’t considered any schools at all. The importance of community colleges was clear in the survey results, as over a quarter of the students said they were considering a 2-year community or junior college.

We live in an age of standardized testing. Taking—and doing well on—the ACT or SAT is a critical part of getting in the door to a university, not to mention accessing many of the scholarships that are offered. Only 60 percent of the total survey group had taken the ACT, and 13 percent had taken the SAT I test. It is worth noting that the survey was distributed in the second semester of the students’ junior year. The final chance to take standardized tests for college admission is typically no later than early fall semester of a student’s senior year.

![Table 5: Leland Students' Plans for the Future, n=78](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work full-time</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend college full-time</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Join military</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend college part-time</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work part-time</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Leland Students' Plans for the Future, n=78
When we look at individual school’s responses, we find even greater disparities. For students at Leland (D school), 63 percent had taken neither the ACT nor the SAT. Of those who had taken either of the tests, the majority had done so within the past school year—their junior year.

![Table 6: Leland: When was the FIRST time you took either the SAT or ACT? n=70](image)

In contrast, we found that only 21 percent of students at Northwest Rankin (C school) had not taken either the ACT or the SAT—over 40 percent less than students at Leland.
There were also differences between genders in terms of standardized testing. Of the total surveyed, 63 percent of female students had taken the ACT or SAT, whereas only 46 percent of male students had taken one of these tests by the second semester of their junior year.

In another question, we asked students: “Please indicate if you have taken any of the following tests.” The tests we referenced were: PSAT, PLAN, SAT I, SAT II (any subject), ACT, Advanced Placement, and ASVAB. Response rates to this question tell us a lot about the levels of preparedness at the individual schools. The question was worded in a way that there was no option for a student to answer that he or she had not taken any test. Thus, only students who had taken at least one of the standardized tests listed would respond to the question. At Leland (D school), the response rate was 32 percent. For those who responded, 76 percent had taken the ACT. This means that only 24 percent of
the total class at Leland had taken the ACT. At Northwest, the response rate was much higher—91 percent. Of students responding to the question, 78 percent had taken the ACT. While that percentage is similar to the statistic from Leland (D school), the difference in response rates reveal a large change in final conclusions. This means that 72 percent of the total class surveyed at Northwest Rankin (C school) had taken the ACT, compared with the meager 24 percent at Leland High School (D school).

Looking at the aggregate numbers (Table 8), students with at least one parent who had not finished high school were more likely to respond that they have never taken the ACT or SAT than those students whose parents had higher levels of education achievement. The majority of students (54 percent) who had one or more parents with less than a high school degree had never taken either test, compared with 21 percent of students who had one or more parents with a graduate or professional degree. The group that was most likely to have taken the ACT or SAT were those students who had one or more parents whose highest level of education was a bachelor’s degree, by a slim margin.

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62 This number, combined with the percentages that said they had never taken the ACT in the graph above, will not add up to 100 percent. This is because some of the students may have taken the SAT (included in the second question), but not the ACT (included in both questions).
Table 8: % of students who have never taken the SAT or ACT (as compared with their parents' level of education)
Additional data points to a dearth of preparation for the ACT or SAT. Half of the respondents had not taken any kind of prep course—50 percent of 292 total responses said they had not ever participated in such a class. Yet, when examining the individual schools’ data, we see that about half of students at Northwest (C school) had taken an ACT/SAT prep course (54 percent), while the majority of students at Leland (D school) had not taken a similar prep course (only 32 percent had taken one).

Regardless of which school the student attended, there was a sense among respondents that standardized testing was the key to getting into college. Over 82 percent of the total respondents from both schools believed that the SAT I or ACT score was “very important” for college admissions. While the recognition of the importance of high-stakes testing is there, students seem to lack either the access or initiative to enroll in prep courses to better prepare themselves for these tests.
According to the body of research about college preparation, AP classes are also valuable in preparing students for college-level coursework.\textsuperscript{63} Yet, the majority of students (51 percent) said they had never taken an AP course.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Number of AP Courses Taken} & \textbf{Percent} \\
\hline
None & 49\% \\
1 to 2 & 38\% \\
3 to 4 & 9\% \\
5 to 6 & 2\% \\
7 to 8 & 0\% \\
9 or more & 1\% \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{NWR: How many Advanced Placement courses have you taken?, \textit{n}=239}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{63} All of the schools where we conducted these interviews offered at least some AP courses to their students.
There was a ten-percentage point difference between the two schools when considering how many students had never taken an AP course. 59 percent at Leland (D school) had never taken an AP course, while only 49 percent at Northwest (C school) had never taken one. Female students were much more likely to have taken an AP course. Only 45 percent of female students from both schools said they had not taken any AP courses, compared with 58 percent of male students.

Regardless of what types of classes students took, it seemed that some students were not being exposed to the rigorous type of writing that is expected in college. Transitioning to college without having had the chance to write lengthy papers will make it difficult to succeed in many college courses. From personal experience, upon entering college, 10 page papers or longer were the norm and expected from the very first semester. Yet, the data fails to reflect preparation for writing papers of this length. 25 respondents (out of 317 total) said that the longest paper they had ever written was 1 to 2
pages. All but one of those students came from Leland High School (D school). 17 students (5 percent) said they had written a 10+ page paper in high school. 16 of those 17 students attended Northwest Rankin High School (C school).

Table 12: Leland High School: What is the longest paper you have ever written for a high school class?, n=77

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pages</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 to 2 pages</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 to 5 pages</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 9 pages</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10+ pages</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend:
- 1 to 2 pages
- 3 to 5 pages
- 6 to 9 pages
- 10+ pages
Looking at Tables 12 and 13, one can see the results by individual school. Strikingly, the percent of students at Northwest Rankin High School (C school) who had written a 6 to 9 page paper was 61 percent; it was only 9 percent at Leland High School (D school).

When asked about how they spent their time outside of the classroom, the majority of students from Northwest Rankin (54 percent) said they spent 1 to 5 hours studying during the course of a normal school week. On the other hand, the majority of students from Leland High School (55 percent) responded that they spent an hour or less per week studying outside of school.

Given the students’ preparation for college (or lack thereof), we thought it would be interesting to ask them for their opinion on when college preparation should begin. The answer most often selected was 9th grade (39 percent), followed by 11th grade (25 percent). The mean for that question fell between 9th and 10th grade, and only a couple of
students selected either of the two extremes—1st through 5th grade or after high school. Students at Leland (D school) were more likely than Northwest Rankin (C school) students to say that preparation needed to begin earlier in their high school career—9th grade versus 11th grade.

Overall, over 80 percent of the respondents said that their high school was preparing them either “somewhat well” or “extremely well” to gain admission to the college of their choice. Students at Leland High School (D school) were more likely to compliment their school on the level to which it had prepared them for admission to college or some other form of higher education; 92 percent of Leland students said that their school had prepared them either “somewhat well” or “extremely well” to gain admission to the college of their choice. At Northwest Rankin (C school), that percentage fell to 79 percent of students who agreed with the statement that their school had prepared them either “somewhat well” or “extremely well” to gain admission to the college of their choice.

In terms of achievement once in college, students’ belief in their schools fell slightly. At Leland High School (D school), 84 percent of students said that their school had prepared them either “somewhat well” or “extremely well” to succeed in college-level work. At Northwest Rankin High School (C school), 76 percent felt that their school had prepared them either “somewhat well” or “extremely well” to succeed in college-level work. Nearly 49 percent of total students said that their school was preparing them “somewhat well” to succeed in college. However, some students were less optimistic about their preparation for higher education, as almost a fifth of all students surveyed said their school was preparing them “not well” for college success.
Table 14: Leland: How well do you feel your high school is preparing you for each of the following?

Table 15: NWR: How well do you feel your high school is preparing you for each of the following?
Female students were more likely to be critical of their school, with 18 percent responding “not well” when asked if their high school was preparing them to gain admission to the college of their choice. This is compared with only 12 percent of male students recording that response.

In this section, I have laid out the highlights from the results of the survey distributed to three high schools in Mississippi. The survey results informed the questions we posed in the interviews, both focus groups and individual. The data in this chapter represents the quantitative aspect of our project. In the following chapter, I will describe the methodology and results from the qualitative component of the thesis: the film.
IV. Film Methodology & Data

Film Methodology

Once the survey part of our thesis was complete, we began to arrange focus groups at the three high schools. The students we interviewed were selected from the same three schools we surveyed: Magee High School (B school), Northwest Rankin High School (C school), and Leland High School (D school). Teachers and counselors chose the students: we had no influence in their decision process.

The first focus group we conducted was at Northwest Rankin High School on December 11, 2013. In order to set this up, we asked for teachers who teach senior students to select individuals who would be interested in and willing to participate in our project. The six students—four girls and two boys—who participated came from a variety of backgrounds and had diverse interests. Although their selection was not random, we still believe that they provided us with a broad enough scope of the students at that school.

On Monday, March 31, 2014, we returned to Northwest Rankin High School to interview individuals. We interviewed three teachers, a librarian, and one of the students from the focus group. The teachers were recommended to us by our main point of contact at the school, Ms. Hodges, who, at the time of contact, was the 9th grade principal. (She is now the Lead Principal of Florence Middle School.)

On Monday, March 17, 2014, we filmed our focus group at Magee High School. The group consisted of three girls and one boy. Once again, we asked teachers to select

\[64\] These ratings may have changed since 2011.
students from a broad range of backgrounds and interests. In addition to the student focus group, we also conducted two individual interviews with teachers.

We encountered the most problems with contacting and arranging interviews at Leland High School. Between the time the survey was completed and the beginning of the next school year, Leland had undergone a complete leadership change, meaning that we had to start from the beginning with the new principal. First, we had to actually speak with him, which was much harder than we thought it would be. Finally, we received assistance from the counselor, Ms. Head. She was critical in getting us into the school and choosing students to participate in the focus group. On April 16, 2014, we filmed the focus group at Leland High School. The group consisted of three boys and two girls. We also completed individual interviews with two of the girls and one of the boys.

In addition to the focus groups and individual interviews conducted at the three high schools, we interviewed several other people outside of the school setting. These include: State Senator Gray Tollison, Chair of the Senate Education Committee; Dr. Angela Rutherford from the School of Education at the University of Mississippi; Sanford Johnson, Deputy Director of Mississippi First; and Caleb Herod, a Teach for America alumnus. We also collected B-roll footage from the various filming locations. The images collected for B-roll include cotton fields, town centers, and hallways in the schools, among others.

After all the film was gathered, we began to review the footage, making careful notes of key points that we felt could add either to the documentary or to our individual written theses. From there, we edited the footage, creating a documentary to be shown in conjunction with the defenses of our written theses.
Film Data

The film was designed to augment the quantitative data collected in the survey through the collection of anecdotes and individuals’ opinions—a much more qualitative type of data. Two types of interviews were conducted: focus groups and individual interviews. Interviewees came from a wide range of backgrounds, from students and high school teachers, to politicians and college professors.

For students, the interview questions covered a broad range of topics, including, but not limited to, students’ backgrounds, post-high school aspirations, thoughts on the high school experience, and what the school could do better in preparing them for college. When speaking with high school teachers, politicians, and college professors, we focused more on policies that might improve college preparation in the state of Mississippi, as well as their views as players in the education system.

Because of the vast amount of data collected through on-camera interviews, we created seven main categories for the data: 1) Student Voice, 2) Mississippi and the Community, 3) Policy, 4) Expectations, 5) College Preparation, 6) Student Aspirations, and 7) Should all students go to college? In this chapter, I will explain each category and give some of the highlights from the interviews. The data provided in this section is not all-inclusive.

I. Student Voice

Our entire project is grounded in the idea that students should have the opportunity to voice their opinions on what is working in their schools—and what is not
working. Although all of the students’ responses would technically fall into this category, the “Student Voice” section contains all quotes from non-students. The purpose of these questions was to ask educators and professionals about the role of student voice in education policy.

In general, when asked about the importance of student voice in education policy and changes, the teachers and professionals we interviewed agreed that students should have their voices heard more frequently. Mississippi State Senator Tollison, who is also the Senate Education Committee Chair, noted, “We—legislators and educators—need to listen to the students more…Talk to them and ask what is making a difference in education…what can make things more interesting…There needs to be more collaboration.” Yet, Senator Tollison also admitted that some of the absence of student voice in policy discussions might be the feeling by students that educators and policy makers “won’t listen to me.”

Ms. Jennifer Wilson, a math teacher at Northwest Rankin High School (C school), suggested particular actions that could be taken to incorporate student voice more fully into the education system. She said, “I think it would be really great to have a deliberate conversation with students who are in 4-year or 2-year schools about what did work, what your high school could have done better.”

Caleb Herod, a Teach for America (TFA) alumnus who taught in the Mississippi Delta, agreed that students should have a voice in education policy discussions. He said, “I do think that students can contribute a lot to the discussion surrounding education. They are the ones going through things right at that moment.”
II. Mississippi and the Community

Questions under this category deal with Mississippi—both its educational system and broader economic and social systems—and the communities in which schools are found. Many of the interview participants emphasized the importance of a strong community in students’ education. Senator Tollison said, “Generally speaking, where you have strong community-supported schools, you have good schools. And where you don’t, you don’t have good schools.” He also touched on the idea of the unique characteristics of different towns and suggested that the state was limited in the extent that it could affect a school’s outcomes, asking, “How do you generate that support?” He told us, “There’s only so much we can do if we don’t live there.”

Mr. Montgomery Hinton, a Chemistry and Physical Science teacher at Northwest Rankin High School (C school), spoke to the importance of integrating the community and the school. He thinks that introducing students to community leaders and professionals is key to encouraging students to reach higher and set goals for themselves. He said, “We should be inviting in community people who have certain professions to expose them to students.”

There was a wide range in the types of comments we heard when we posed questions about the state of Mississippi. Students tended to hold negative views about Mississippi’s educational system and their ability to find substantive, meaningful, well-paying jobs in the state. One student, Robert H., from Leland High School (D school) explained his feelings about Leland, Mississippi, saying, “Being in Leland makes me nervous…I won’t succeed as a person.” When asked why that it is, he noted, “Leland
isn’t a place to thrive…The jobs pay hourly wages, minimum wage.” Yet, later in the conversation, Robert emphasized the importance of home: “Remember where you came from,” indicating conflicting feelings about Mississippi.

The sense of needing to leave the state was rampant among students. All of the students in the focus group at Leland High School said they wanted to move to another state after graduating from college. Mikei J., one of the students at Leland, painted a picture of a town with nothing to offer. “A lot of kids get in trouble,” he said. “That’s because they have nothing to do.” What would have to change to make students stay? Many said that there would have to be more opportunities for young people to get a career that was fulfilling and had a decent salary.

Students also expressed concern over going to college as a product of a Mississippi public high school. One student from Magee High School (B school) said, “I don’t feel prepared to compete on the national scale.” Another noted, “There’s no way I can compete because Mississippi is at the bottom of the list.”

Despite the prevalence of negative feelings about the state, students also recognized the value of growing up in Mississippi. One student summed up the state by saying, “We have a huge heart in Mississippi.” Many students also felt offended by how Mississippi is often viewed by others. A student said those stereotypes are offensive, and “I want to show you that I can be as good or better than my competition.” As Northwest Rankin’s Mr. Hinton said, “We’re written off a lot because we’re 50th.” Yet, he argued, “I have loved being in Mississippi. I love the fact that our kids do so many things and are so successful at so many different things.”
III. Policy

This broad category encompasses questions that involve any kind of education policy at a local, state, or federal level. Students were vocal about their ideas for improving education in the state, and they offered many recommendations for changes that should occur. While not always using policy terms to state their ideas, the students impressed us with their sophisticated views on what changes needed to happen within their school, district, or state.

Many students expressed a desire for semester-long classes on ACT preparation, applying for colleges, and applying for scholarships. Keyra N., a student at Leland High School (D school), said, “Leland could have a study hall, where all seniors come apply for college.” Ramsey B., who is graduating a year early from Northwest Rankin High School (C school), said that while Northwest is doing a good job overall, “They could do more with scholarships.” One student from Leland noted the difficulty of the college application process as a whole, saying, “It was surprising how hard the application process was. I thought I just put my name and go. I really did think that.” Thus, many students wanted greater assistance with the entire process.

Students also indicated that school policies should push students more, as well as allowing them more freedom and responsibility. Mikei J. said, “Leland could extend school hours,” offer Saturday school, or give the students more work. Robert H. said that students are limited in their ability to express themselves, noting, “There’s certain things you just can’t do in high school, in Leland.” Cason G., from Northwest Rankin High
School, said the long summer break is detrimental to the students in Mississippi. He concluded that year-round school would be better for students.

Ramsey B. emphasized the feeling of a lack of responsibility and freedom: “Instead of spoon feeding everything to us, they need to let us have some responsibility.” She noted that her dual credit classes—classes in which students can gain college credit from a local college or university—forced students to take on more work and responsibility, and those were the classes that helped her best prepare for college.

Many students suggested that a greater network of communication between themselves and alumni from their high school is important. Robert H. said that inviting former high school students who are in now in college to come talk to them would be extremely helpful because, “they can see it’s possible to go to college.”

Finally, students talked a lot about their teachers, and it was perhaps the most divisive topic among students. Many of the students agreed that having a good teacher made a big difference in the classroom. One student noted that what sets teachers apart is when they “care about you inside the classroom and outside the classroom.” While some students said they had those teachers already, many argued that their school lacked quality teachers. In fact, a student at Magee said, “A lot of time, the teacher is the problem. When there’s different types of students, but they’re only teaching one way, you don’t reach all of the students.”

We asked many of the professionals about the idea of tracking and whether or not they support that kind of policy. Dr. Angela Rutherford, Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Mississippi’s School of Education, said that as long as students are equally prepared for post-graduation opportunities, then
tracking is not necessarily a bad policy to adopt. Dr. Rutherford, who also is the Director of the Center for Excellence in Literary Instruction (CELI), added, “But if it gets to the point where we’re dumping kids into this track…without giving them opportunities, then I have a problem with that.” Senator Tollison took a harder stance against tracking, emphasizing that a student’s choices of classes should be “up to the individual.” Mr. Chase Courtney, a Business teacher at Magee High School (B school), argued in favor of tracking, saying it was a good policy that should be instituted in Mississippi high schools. He told us, “You should identify in the 9th grade students who are more technically-related, and then you send them to technical school, if that’s what they want to do.”

There was also a recurring call for greater communication between K-12 schools and institutions of higher education. Northwest Rankin’s Ms. Wilson argued that is was good to have partnerships between high schools and community colleges and that more were needed. These partnerships make way for dual credit programs, which give students “an opportunity to get college credit in high school.” Senator Tollison agreed and said that the legislature can help to “develop stronger relationships between our colleges and K-12 schools.”

From a politician’s point of view, the state legislature plays an important role in education in the state of Mississippi. Senator Tollison concluded, “I think there was a sense in the legislature we needed to be more actively involved…We’re stewards of the taxpayers’ money, and one of the main things we need to do is educate our students, and many times we’re falling short of that.” When asked what would be the one thing he would do to change education policy in the state, Senator Tollison responded that he would “have an effective teacher in every classroom.”
We spoke to many of the professionals about what Common Core means in terms of preparing students for college. Overall, there was strong support for the standards, and a general agreement that raising the standards through the implementation of Common Core would help in preparing students for post-secondary education. Dr. Rutherford says that the new standards emphasize close reading and synthesizing texts, “in a way that we haven’t required in the past.” While she was strongly in favor of Common Core Standards, she argued, “If we don’t have the teachers to implement those standards in a way that changes their practice, then we can’t move the needle on student achievement.”

Most of the teachers seem to be on board with the new standards. Mr. Hinton, from Northwest Rankin, is excited about the prospect of standards that align with other states across the country. Another Northwest Rankin teacher, Ms. Wilson, agreed. She said, “I think Common Core Standards are a good thing in another sense because it connects us to educators across the country. If I have a question, I can go to Twitter and ask, and then I have answers from across the U.S. in a matter of minutes.” She also supports the standards because they are “purposely written.” Ms. Wilson believes the standards help students to see how what they are learning in the classroom applies to the real world, providing students “with opportunities to make connections.”

Caleb Herod, a Teach For America alumnus, also offered support for the standards. He told us, “Common Core State Standards made it a lot easier for me to be free as a math teacher.” He emphasized that they were a step up from the standards that were in place prior to the implementation of CCSS, saying, “Frankly, some of the standards Mississippi had at the time were not competitive and did not push students to learn at their full capacity.”
Senator Tollison noted that the standards teach students “higher order thinking, instead of just learning one process.” He acknowledged the controversy surrounding Common Core, especially in Mississippi, saying that people are concerned about the federal government becoming too involved in the schools. Yet, he argued, “These standards are very simple…[these] are things we should teach our children.” Senator Tollison told us that he does expect some backlash when parents see test scores and they aren’t what they used to be.

There was some dissent among the professionals with regards to Common Core. Magee High School’s Mr. Courtney suggested that the standards were not designed any differently than any previous set of standards or assessments. He said, “Common Core, state assessments—it’s all about preparing students for a test.”

Teacher quality and recruitment were also big areas of discussion for many of the professionals we spoke with during the interviews. Dr. Rutherford told us that there is not a teacher shortage in Mississippi; instead, “We have a teacher shortage in places where teachers do not want to go for various reasons—isolated geographically, challenging position because all of the students are economically disadvantaged…” Caleb Herod, who taught in the Mississippi Delta for two years, said that students there lack a “continuity of teachers.” He explained that their teachers do not stay long. Furthermore, “when they lose a teacher, they are not always replaced with a teacher who is qualified…Kids are going into classes that are very instrumental in their growth, but their teachers are permanent substitutes.” To be able to recruit and retain good teachers, “we need to pay them,” Dr. Rutherford argued. She also insisted that teacher performance should be a factor in deciding pay.
Senator Tollison agreed that being able to pay teachers more would make the positions more competitive. He was enthusiastic about the teacher pay raise which was passed through the legislature, which provides a 10% pay raise for starting teachers, with increasing numbers as the teachers gain experience.

What did teachers have to say about the responsibility of being a teacher? Mr. Hinton, from Northwest, said that his “job is to be a facilitator.” He said: “Educationally, could I do a better job? Absolutely. That drives me every day. How can I be a better person for my kids?” He went on to emphasize the importance of his role: “We have to conform to standards, but ultimately, my classroom has 30 kids that belong to me, and it’s important I remember that every day.” Ms. Wilson noted that teachers’ responsibilities extend beyond simply preparing the students for college. In addition, she said, “We are trying to make students good, productive members of society.” Caleb Herod agreed, saying, “These students need more than just a teacher. They need a mentor or role model.”

Caleb Herod also spoke about the need to reach all students in a classroom, which was an area of complaint for many of the focus group participants. He said, “A lot of times, reaching all students involves going to their football games or basketball games or cheerleading meets. It involves staying after school with them and talking with them. It means going to their dad’s barbershop and talking with members of the community who affect our kids’ lives.”

What are some of the consequences of the failings of current policies regarding college preparation? Senator Tollison noted that high rates of remediation in college are a huge drain financially for the state. “Right now,” he said, “we spend $35 million for
remediation.” Dr. Rutherford agreed. She argued that remedial coursework in college “takes away huge financial resources from other areas because we have to spend money to make sure that they are better prepared for entering credit-bearing courses.”

IV. Expectations

Expectations are defined here as the standards students are held to in the classroom and in the high school in general. Interviewees, both students and professionals, emphasized the importance of expectations in a student’s ability to achieve.

Most of the students interviewed told us that expectations are set too low in Mississippi. Christopher F., a student from Magee High School (B school), said that counselors and teachers at Magee often tell students not to take a certain class because of its level of difficulty—and the prospect of not receiving an A. Christopher F. argued these are exactly the types of classes that students need to be enrolled in: “No, they should tell us to take that class.”

Teachers and other professionals seem to agree on the importance of expectations in the classroom. Mr. Hinton said, “The role of expectations is really important. If I look at a kid and write them off, then they won’t make it. I look forward to every kid that walks into my class as an opportunity…” Yet, he qualified his answer slightly, saying that while expectations must be high, they “should be right in front of them, but just out of reach, so they’re always striving to get there. If they are too far away, the students will lose focus.” Ms. Wilson echoed Mr. Hinton’s comments: “Teachers must see potential in
their students. As long as they think the students can’t do it, they won’t provide students the opportunities.”

Senator Tollison thinks that Mississippi has failed in setting those high expectations for students in the state. He told us, “Right now, we haven’t raised the bar. We haven’t set the high expectations.” Dr. Rutherford agreed, at least for some schools in the state. “Many of those students who have the difficulty are coming from schools that haven’t challenged them—or the expectations are so low that they’ve just made it through,” she said.

V. College Preparation

Another rather broad category, this section focuses on students’ views regarding college preparation. Many students felt their high schools—whether it be Magee, Northwest, or Leland—had failed them in some way in preparing them for post-secondary education. KaBreisha E., a student at Leland High School (D school), said, “I do not think my high school has prepared me for college. I think out of all the classes I have taken, it is easy to do work and turn it in. You can procrastinate and still get a good grade.” Most of the other Leland students agreed. A student at Magee High School (B school) also felt that she was not prepared, yet she said the reason was due to disruptions caused by other students. Mark M., a student at Northwest Rankin (C school), noted, “In some aspects, I do not feel prepared for college,” explaining that some teachers of his teachers are too lenient, providing too much extra time to turn in assignments. The
students at Northwest Rankin also told us about the final exam policy at their school: “If you have perfect attendance, you only have to have passing grades to be exempt.”

Yet other students disagreed. Keyra N., a student at Leland High School, told us, “I do feel prepared for work at the next level. You just have to apply yourself.” Ramsey B. praised her high school, saying, “I think that Northwest has prepared me really well. Some classes were extremely easy, but others really taught me how to study.” She specifically noted the dual enrollment courses as exceptional and great for preparing for college-level coursework.

One of the programs that Magee High School students seemed to agree was extremely beneficial to them was the GEAR UP program, a U.S. Department of Education grant program designed to give low-income students help in applying to and succeeding in post-secondary education. Christopher F. said, “I do not think we would have had the knowledge that we have as far as being college prepared without GEAR UP…I don’t think we would have known we had options.” They all agreed that it afforded them opportunities that were not offered at the school, such as ACT preparatory classes and fee waivers for the standardized tests.

We also asked teachers about their views on college preparation: the school’s role in it, whether or not their school was doing enough to prepare students for college, and their general views on the issue. Mr. Hinton, from Northwest Rankin, noted that while some students may not be college-ready, they are trade-ready. Regardless of whether the student is college- or trade-ready, Mr. Hinton said, “For the large majority of students,

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they need to be involved in college prep or technical prep to see pathways to get their future going.”

Ms. Wilson told us, “Northwest is not doing everything right necessarily, but we are doing a lot of things right. We hear back from students about how prepared they were for higher education. They meet a lot of classmates who aren’t as prepared in college. However, there’s always room for improvement. We maybe aren’t meeting certain groups, for example.”

VI. Student Aspirations

Aspirations are an important aspect of a student’s decision to go to college—or even to apply. We asked students about what drove their decision to attend college and why they aspire to a higher education—or if they do at all. We also questioned professionals about the role of adults in assisting students with aspiring to attend college.

To be able to understand students’ aspirations about college, we first asked what an education means to them individually. Students were passionate in their responses. Daii G., a student from Magee High School, said, “Education is everything. No matter what you may go through, knowledge is always with you. In the world, when you are exposed to so much and competing on a world scale, education is key.” Cayla M., another Magee student, added to her comment, saying, “Education is power. The more educated people are, the better life will be.” Other students noted the importance of being able to communicate with people who are different from themselves. Christopher F. joked, “I can go to college, and then I can break bread with the Obamas.”
With all this passion and energy around the idea of an education, why don’t all students attend college? Robert H., from Leland, pointed to the environment in which some students grow up. He said, “People in my school—no one is dumb. People are surrounded by negativity. If all you hear about are bills, then you have a pessimistic future.” There also seemed to be some fear about what college really is and whether or not students will thrive there. Many interviewees admitted that their greatest fear about college was flunking out. Some students said seeing so many of their older friends return home after not being able to complete their college education has caused this fear.

Other students noted that their parents did not achieve any form of higher education. Three of the six students interviewed at Northwest Rankin said that their parents did not attend college; and of those students, one said his mother dropped out in eighth grade. For some students, their parents’ lack of a post-secondary education actually drives them to go to college.

For students who have decided to go to college, they listed a number of factors that led to that decision, including influence from family and friends, desire to better themselves, and a recognition that a college education can lead to better-paying, more fulfilling jobs.

So what can teachers and other professionals do to convince students that college is an option? Senator Tollison said, “It’s important to bridge the connection between what you’re learning in school and what the real-world application is.” KaBreisha E., from Leland, said that for her visiting schools helped her see what college is really like. Dual enrollment and Advanced Placement courses also can be a way for students to experience college before they get there. Ms. Christian, a teacher at Northwest Rankin High School,
said of dual enrollment classes: “They enter into the course and see they have the ability
to complete college work. They’re not as hesitant as they might be otherwise.”

Mr. Hinton said, “I think it is very important for students to see as many
opportunities as they can.” Dr. Rutherford agreed, noting, “If we want kids to see
themselves as potential college graduates, we have to have them visualize themselves on
a college campus before they can get that degree.” Robert H. also believed that seeing
students who had graduated from high school in college was important for him and his
peers. Then, he said, “they can see it’s possible to go to college.” Dr. Rutherford
emphasized the importance of mentors in students’ lives. She concluded, “Every student
needs someone in their balcony.”

Ms. Wilson spent a lot of time talking about the need to teach students about a
growth mind-set mentality, meaning that students can learn more and grow educationally
if they put their mind to it and work hard. She also became emotional talking about her
daughter who is bullied by other students when she makes a mistake. Ms. Wilson argued,
“If they grow up in an environment where everything is supposed to be correct, where
they can’t make a mistake, they don’t realize that it is okay to make a mistake.”

VII. Should all students go to college?

We asked the professionals we interviewed: Do you think all students should go
to college? To be clear, we are defining college as any post-secondary education, whether
at a trade school, community college, 2-year or 4-year university. We explained our
definition of college to them before posing the question.
Most interviewees avoiding giving us a straight yes or no answer. Dr. Rutherford said:

“I think we should in K-12—I’m going to my K-12 experience—I think we should aspire and that the expectation is that we’re going to prepare you to attend college if that’s what you want to do. But if you want to go into a career, you want to be an artist, and you don’t necessarily need college, then I want that person to be just as prepared because they’re going to face some of the same challenges as the person who goes to college—in a different way, but the same challenges. I want that person to be able to think critically so they don’t lose all their money, or they don’t read the contract well... So while I don’t think that necessarily everyone will attend or needs to attend college, I do think that we have a responsibility to make sure that they are prepared for college.”

Senator Tollison told us that in most instances, all students should go to college. Yet, he noted, there are exceptions. The bottom line, however, Tollison said, was that “we need to increase the percentage of high school graduates who attend two-year college or four-year college or technical school. It makes a difference in the opportunities we have for gainful employment to make a decent living.”

Mr. Hinton answered the question by saying, “For the large majority of people, we want them to go to college. But too many people are close-minded to the other opportunities.” He went on to explain his role in that process: “My purpose with my kids is go to college or figure out another path where they can stand on their own and be successful. For most, that’s go to college. But for some, that’s another option.”
Ms. Wilson offered another response, telling us, “I’m not certain that I believe that all students should go to college.” Yet, she did admit that all students should be prepared for college. Ms. Christian concluded, “All students should be aware of the opportunities that are available to them.”

Mr. Courtney, from Magee, answered with a definitive no: “I definitely do not. I think that’s where we’ve messed up as a country…When you graduate, it should be work or college.”
V. Discussion & Policy Recommendations

Perhaps the most interesting part of this project has been seeing the interactions between the quantitative data (from the survey) and the qualitative data (from the focus groups and individual interviews), and it reinforces the value of a mixed-methods approach to research. In this section, I will discuss how the information gained from the literature review, the survey, and the interviews have led me to suggest certain policy recommendations. I will focus on three major areas of concern and offer a possible policy solution for each: lack of high expectations and rigorous coursework for students; preparation for and success in standardized testing; and information about navigating the college application process.

1. Lack of high expectations and rigorous coursework for students

At every school we visited, students expressed an interest in more rigorous coursework at the high school level, as well as a desire to be pushed to reach higher by their teachers. Rather than reaching for the highest levels of achievement, the schools in Mississippi are settling for passing grades and average classes, according to the students. The problem requires a three-pronged solution: 1) The state of Mississippi must put into place higher standards, and Common Core is one path towards that goal; 2) All students must have access to AP and dual credit courses, and they should be encouraged to take them; and, 3) Teachers and counselors must view every student as capable of success; when they judge a student to be incapable, those expectations will oftentimes become reality.
Compared with other states in the country, Mississippi is at the bottom in regards to setting high state standards. As discussed throughout the thesis, this results in students either not gaining access to college or enrolling in remedial coursework once they are at the institution of higher education. Students told us repeatedly that they felt unprepared to compete on a national scale, and teachers worried about the accuracy of state tests in predicting a student’s level of readiness. Thus, standardization in expectations is needed, and Common Core does just that.

Common Core is changing the way in which the state of Mississippi views standards in education in K-12 schools. A report by the Fordham Institute in 2010 concluded: “With their grade of D, Mississippi’s ELA standards are among the worst in the country, while those developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative earn a solid B-plus. The CCSS ELA standards are significantly superior to what the Magnolia State has in place today.” The Joint Legislative Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review (PEER) emphasized the history of low standards in Mississippi. In their report, “The Common Core State Standards: Mississippi’s Adoption and Implementation,” the authors write, “In Mississippi, public school students have had a history of poor performance on national tests and a large percentage of students must enroll in remedial courses once they begin college.” These standards will help even the playing field for students in Mississippi. With CCSS, their scores will be comparable to students’ scores from Hawaii or Texas.


The introduction and implementation of CCSS has not been without controversy. There are many individuals who believe the standards represent a federal power grab. In fact, the standards were created at the state-level, and they simply provide benchmarks, not curricula, for high schools in the state of Mississippi.\textsuperscript{68}

However, Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant recently signaled that he might no longer support CCSS when the next legislative session begins, stating that the standards have “failed.”\textsuperscript{69} The state superintendent of education, Carey Wright, quickly responded, arguing that the standards are “still in the implementation phase, and to remove the standards now would be disheartening to the district and school leaders and teachers who have invested time and resources in this effort.”\textsuperscript{70} Yet, the Governor’s statement opens the door to the possibility of repealing the standards next year.

Mississippi must not back away from Common Core State Standards. While the standards may not be perfect, they are an improvement over the state’s old standards. To repeal the standards would be a loss for the students, as this is an opportunity to finally embrace higher expectations—something that the students crave. In addition, the teachers who are implementing these standards believe in them. As Ms. Wilson from Northwest Rankin High School (C school) told us, the standards allow her to connect to other teachers, improving her abilities in the classroom.


Common Core Standards are not the only way to raise standards, however. Many students that we spoke with believed that the classes that prepared them for success in college were either AP or dual credit classes. Yet some students noted that their school offered a very limited number of AP classes, or that the classes were very exclusive. AP courses should be accessible and rigorous in order to prepare students to be academically prepared for college-level work.

Finally, the teachers are the individuals responsible for enforcing standards and expectations. Therefore, teachers must expect all of their students to reach higher. If a teacher sees a student and thinks, “He won’t succeed,” then that student is destined for failure. We heard from teachers that it is their responsibility to see each student’s potential and help him or her reach it.

To help teachers see the potential in their students, schools should offer administrative support and teaching strategies for reaching all students through professional development classes. Teachers need to know more than how to put together a lesson plan: they must also understand how to engage every student in the lesson, ensuring that all students are prepared for some form of post-secondary education.

II. Preparation for and success in standardized testing

Standardized testing is more important than ever before in the path to college. It serves as a measure of understanding in key subject areas and acts as a doorway to higher education. In our survey, over three-quarters of the students from each school said that the SAT or ACT score was “very important” in college admissions. Yet, at Leland High
School, for example, nearly two-thirds of students had not taken the ACT or SAT by the second semester of their junior year. This points to a lack of awareness about the test. For those students who do take these standardized tests, they are often not prepared to achieve high scores. As noted in the literature review, only 12 percent of 2013 Mississippi ACT-tested high school graduates met all four college readiness benchmarks.\textsuperscript{71} Even if students score high enough on the test to gain acceptance to college, they may still lack preparation in key areas, necessitating remedial courses.\textsuperscript{72} While raising one’s score is important, the score reflects the core of the issue: content mastery. Many Mississippi high school students lack the two keys to successful standardized test-taking: knowing the material covered on the test and knowing how to \textit{take} the test.

The State of Mississippi’s Board of Education has recognized that lack of preparation for and achievement in standardized testing is a major problem within the education system. It has taken an important step in proposing the incorporation of the ACT test into its accountability model. Additionally, it has proposed that the state pay for the test to be administered to all juniors in high school, as many other states do.\textsuperscript{73} Yet the policy proposed by the board of education focuses on state- and school-level accountability. This approach has potential negative consequences for individual


\textsuperscript{73} Mississippi. Mississippi Department of Education. Office of Accreditation and Accountability. \textit{Statewide Accountability System Proposal}. 2013. Print.
If a student scores a 14 on the ACT, there is currently no intervention program to assist the student in learning the material so that he or she can raise the score. These students are left behind, as the focus is placed on raising overall schools' performances in the subsequent years.

To address individual student accountability, an intervention program must be implemented in high schools in Mississippi. This program would require students who fail to meet ACT benchmark scores to participate in courses that would seek to boost their preparedness in that particular subject area. Consequently, students would master the content in that area, thus being prepared for college-level work in that topic and meeting the necessary benchmarks to apply to and enroll in an institution of higher learning. In addition to the increase in the number of students who would be able to attend college, less remedial coursework would be required once the students enroll in an institution of higher learning because the problem would have been addressed in high school.

The courses would be targeted to address the specific area in which the student is struggling. For example, if the student failed to meet the benchmark score for the reading section, then he or she could enroll in a remedial reading course that would work to raise the student’s reading comprehension, and consequently raise the student’s score.

Evaluating the effectiveness of these courses is important. In order to do this, one would need to compare ACT scores before and after a student enrolls in one of these remedial courses.

Similar policies have been implemented in other states. For example, the Tennessee State Board of Education designed a “bridge” math course for students who
fail to score at least a 19 on the ACT mathematics subtest by their senior year. Indiana House Bill 1005 established a grant program that allows for remedial instruction for students who are likely to fail a graduation exam and to prevent the necessity of post-secondary remedial coursework.

Institution of such courses will not solve all the problems related to high-stakes testing. This is a temporary solution to help students who are nearing the end of their high school careers and are failing to reach benchmarks on the ACT or SAT, showing that they have not mastered basic content in key subject areas that are needed in college. In the long run, we need solutions that address the problem much earlier and level the playing field for all students across the state. For example, ACT and SAT prep courses should not just be available to those students who can afford them. If these tests continue to play a large role in the college admissions process, then steps must be taken to ensure that there are not inherent disadvantages for certain students, especially students from low-income families.

Another possibility—one that is, admittedly, more drastic—is the elimination of high stakes test scores from the college admission process. Despite the proposal’s revolutionary nature, some schools are already taking the initiative and converting their applications to make them “test-score optional.” This seems to be a growing trend, as

more studies are finding that test scores are not the best indicators for a student’s chance for success in college. A study conducted by the National Association for College Admissions Counseling concluded: “Few significant differences between submitters and non-submitters of testing were observed in cumulative GPAs and graduation rates, despite significant differences in SAT/ACT scores.”\textsuperscript{77} The students who did not submit their scores on college applications were more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds, possibly pointing to an achievement gap on standardized tests that results from differences in socioeconomic status. Professor Joseph Soares, from Wake Forest University, notes, “Test scores transmit social disparities without improving our ability to select youths who will succeed in college.”\textsuperscript{78} Thus, these tests seem to be part of the problem, perpetuating inequalities within the college admissions process and leaving some students behind.

III. Information about the college application process

The two previous sections mean little if a student does not understand how to apply for college. A student may have a 30 on the ACT, but without knowledge of how to complete college and scholarship applications, he or she is not fully prepared. Counseling is an effective means of ensuring that students are aware of the intricacies of the process


and how to overcome some of the process’s major hurdles. One study noted, “Students who visited their counselor for college-related information appear more likely to enroll in postsecondary education and at four year institutions in particular, at least on average.”

Therefore, schools should invest in college counselors who can advise students individually about the college application process.

There are two main problems with the current counseling system in high schools in the state: extremely high student-to-counselor ratios and lack of training for and investment in college counselors. In 2006, the National Association for College Admission Counseling released a series of reports on the importance of college counselors in high schools. They reported that, on average, each counselor in Mississippi has 510 students that they are responsible for advising. Similar rates were seen across the country—some as high as 797 students per counselor. The recommended maximum student-to-counselor ratio, according to the Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, is 250:1. In Mississippi, we are more than doubling that number. Thus, “students in public schools can expect less than an hour of postsecondary education counseling during the entire school year.”

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82 Ibid.
this conclusion, finding “public school students receive an average of 38 minutes of college admissions advice from their guidance counselors.”

In the survey data we collected, most students spent very little time talking to their counselors at school. Some did not even know who their counselor was in high school. Students also admitted a severe lack of understanding about the rigor of the college application process. Even students who were able to navigate it successfully wished that they had more assistance, especially in regards to scholarships.

Accurate, effective counseling is especially needed in low-income communities. An article from The Atlantic stated, “Low-income students are making choices with higher stakes. They require not only better information, resources, and advocacy through the process, but also need mentors and counselors who can take the time to help them work through the complex personal struggles they face both before and after the acceptance letters arrive.”

Research supports this conclusion. One researcher who explored the effect of counseling on college enrollment wrote, “My analysis revealed school-based counseling as making a distinct and substantial contribution to the college enrollment and destinations of low-SES [socioeconomic status] populations especially.”

A few important recommendations can be made from the existing research and the students’ self-professed struggles with the college application process. First, student-to-counselor ratios should be reduced as much as possible. This provides students with

84 Ibid.
more personal attention and guidance from the counselors. Second, the counselors should be offered professional development so that they are up-to-date on the current application environment. This is crucial, as the application and admissions process is in constant flux.

Finally, schools that lack the resources to employ an adequate number of counselors should be creative in their approaches to guidance. At all three schools where we talked to students, we heard the same recommendation: ask former high school students who graduated from that high school to come back and speak with current students. This is a no-cost way to inform students about the college admissions process. While this does not provide the same quality as a guidance counselor, which cannot be replaced, the peer-to-peer interaction could be helpful in motivating students and allowing the students to envision themselves in college.
VI. Conclusion

For the past four years, Kaitlyn and I have delved into the lives of students around Mississippi. I have learned a lot about the policies surrounding college preparation, and, in my opinion, the state of Mississippi as a whole has much work to do to ensure that all students are prepared for some form of post-secondary education. Although students recognize the importance of a college degree in today’s society, they lack the tools and opportunities to be prepared for college-level work. Students want to be pushed. They believe in themselves and their peers: it is time that teachers and legislators believe in them as well.

This is not to say that the issue is hopeless. I think there are several clear paths forward in the realm of policy that could alleviate some of the most egregious problems in the system, as I outlined in the previous section. The most important lesson I have learned, however, is that these next steps must actively involve the students. Throughout the project, I have been incredibly impressed with the students we encountered. Their articulate, thoughtful ideas on how to improve the educational experience in Mississippi are key to making real change. Education policy does not occur in a vacuum. It is not just words on a page. The policies enacted by local, state, and federal officials impact the lives of students across the state who have real hopes, desires, and dreams. The humanity in our schools—the essential core of what education is—must not be forgotten in the halls of the legislature. Therefore, I want to emphasize student voice. Future projects that focus on college preparation—or any education issue—should involve students. They have ideas, but they are not offered the platforms to speak. We must give them that space to voice their opinions.
There are a few remaining steps for me to take before my part in this project is complete. First, Kaitlyn and I will be screening the film on the campus of the University of Mississippi on December 5, 2014 in the Overby Center. We are inviting state legislators, educators, students, and other invested parties to view the film so that the work we have done might impact education policy in the state. We will also distribute the film to interested individuals at the three schools where we filmed.

Second, we will create a short policy brief about our thesis to send to legislators and educators in the state and in the federal government. This will help us disseminate our ideas to people who are in roles to make change in education policy in Mississippi and in the United States. For example, we spoke with individuals in Boston, Massachusetts at the think tank Jobs for the Future. They expressed interest in reading our completed thesis, and a shorter pamphlet that summarizes our project would be the perfect way to fulfill that promise to Jobs for the Future.

I have several ideas for anyone who would like to take up this issue in the future. First, we were unable to accurately collect survey data from the B school (Magee High School). Thus, our data is skewed, as we do not have representation from an A or B school. Any future projects should collect data from schools so that each state grading level (A-F) is represented. It also may be useful to find an alternative way to categorize the schools, as there are some doubts as to how accurate the state’s grading system is. More importantly, the grades change yearly, so they are not as constant as other possible identifiers.

Second, I would have liked to conduct a follow-up survey with the students after they entered college. Kaitlyn and I were unable to do this because we lacked time and
resources. Our project’s deadline was in mid-November, and we believed it necessary for
the follow-up survey to be conducted after the students were in college a full semester.
This ensures they have taken final exams, one of the main experiences with which I
struggled. A follow-up survey, along with follow-up interviews, would help us better
understand whether or not students’ expectations of college matched the realities of
college. Follow-up interviews should also be conducted when they are seniors in college,
so that they can reflect on their entire journey.

Third, a project should be created just to focus on college preparation and student
aspirations in the Mississippi Delta. Our experience at Leland High School was
incomparable. We learned so much from those students, and they revealed a strong desire
for change. One student in particular was truly inspiring in his passion for his community
and other low-income communities across the state. Although the students at Leland
High School had similar grievances with their education as the other students did, they
also spoke more openly about the oppressiveness of their small town and the cycle of
poverty that permeates their entire lives. Their story is powerful and should be told as a
stand-alone project.

College preparation is a vast topic that has only recently come under much
scrutiny. With the President of the United States urging all students to get some form of
post-secondary education and the First Lady launching her own Reach Higher initiative,
there has not been a time where the issue has been more relevant or so widely
discussed.86 My thesis affirms the importance of preparing all students for education after

86 The Reach Higher Initiative, launched by First Lady Michelle Obama, is designed to “inspire
every student in America to take charge of their future by completing their education past high
school.” For more information about this initiative, visit http://www.whitehouse.gov/reach-
higher.
high school, and it indicates that the state of Mississippi is failing to fulfill that responsibility to its students.

Education is key to breaking the vicious poverty cycle that many students face. The new economic landscape has made a college degree not just more valuable, but almost a requirement for job opportunities. Without equal access to higher education, social mobility will continue to be severely limited, crippling a large portion of the United States population. It is time we ensure that all students have access to a quality secondary education that prepares them for college.
VII. Bibliography


VIII. Appendices

Appendix A: Survey

“The Way I See It” Survey

General Instructions: Please mark your response by filling in the appropriate square.

1. Your gender: □ male □ female

2. Indicate your overall grade point average (unweighted) in high school:

□ 4.0 and above
□ 3.5-3.9
□ 3.0-3.4
□ 2.5-2.9
□ 2.0-2.4
□ 1.5-1.9
□ 1.4 or lower

3. What is the highest level of education obtained by each of your parents (or guardians)? (Mark one in each column)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Mother</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate (or GED)</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education after high school other than a 2-year or 4-year college (e.g. trade school)</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate/professional degree (Master’s, Doctorate, Law, Medicine)</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. a.) What do you plan to do after high school? (Mark all that apply)

□ work full-time
□ attend college full-time
□ join military
□ attend college part-time
□ work part-time
□ undecided
□ other ____________________ (specify)
b.) If you plan to attend college, either full-time or part-time, please indicate the type of college you are considering. (Mark all types that you are considering.)

- I haven’t considered any schools
- A US military academy
- A 2-year community or junior college
- A 4-year private college or university
- A 4-year public college or university
- A technical/trade school
- Other type of school _______________ (specify)

5. When should students BEGIN preparing for college?

- 1st-5th grade
- 6th-8th grade
- 9th grade
- 10th grade
- 11th grade
- 12th grade
- After high school
- Never

6. Please indicate if you have taken any of the following tests. (Mark all that apply)

- PSAT
- PLAN
- SAT I
- SAT II (any subject)
- ACT
- Advanced Placement
- ASVAB

7. When was the FIRST time you took either the SAT or ACT?

- Never took either test
- 7th grade or earlier
- 8th grade
- 9th grade
- 10th grade
- 11th grade
8. Since entering high school, have you ever: (Mark one for each activity)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visited a college or university</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in varsity/junior varsity athletics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used a computer at home</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taken an SAT/ACT test prep course</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended a college information workshop or “college night”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9. How many Advanced Placement courses have you taken?

- none
- 1-2
- 3-4
- 5-6
- 7-8
- 9 or more

10. What is the longest paper you have ever written for a high school class?

- 1-2
- 3-5
- 6-9
- 10+

11. Do you know who your high school counselor is?  Yes  No

12. How often have you discussed college with each of the following people? (Mark one for each row)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Many times</th>
<th>Once or twice</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Any high school counselor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any high school teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A high school coach</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your parent(s)/guardian(s)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your brother or sister</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another relative not listed above</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends/other students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A family friend</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A clergy member (priest, rabbi, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A college recruiter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A private college counselor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
13. How much time do you spend during a typical school week doing the following? (Mark one for each item)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>&lt; 1 hour</th>
<th>1-5 hours</th>
<th>6-10 hours</th>
<th>11-15 hours</th>
<th>&gt; 15 hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Studying/homework</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socializing with friends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking with teachers outside of class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking with high school counselors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking with your parent(s)/guardian(s)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working (for pay)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student clubs/groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise/sports</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housework/childcare</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading for pleasure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching TV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surfing the web</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networking</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14. Indicate your best guess of the cost of tuition for one year at each of the following colleges. (Tuition only. Do not include cost of books, housing, or other expenses. Write an amount for each.)

a) Your local community college: $__________________ per year

b) A public university in Mississippi: $__________________ per year

c) A public university outside of Mississippi: $__________________ per year

15. How worried are you about being able to pay for college expenses?

☐ Not planning to attend college
☐ Very worried
☐ Somewhat worried
☐ Not worried
☐ too worried
☐ Not worried at all
☐ Don’t know
16. How important are each of these for college admission? (Mark one for each item)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Moderately important</th>
<th>Minor factor</th>
<th>Not important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your high school grades</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your senior year grades</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your application essay</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your geographic background (where you live)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exceptional talents (athletics, art, leadership, etc.)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT I or ACT test score</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT II test score</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic reputation of your high school</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in volunteer work</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class rank</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in extracurricular activities</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters of recommendation</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial/ethnic background</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17. What do you think is the primary purpose of a college education? (Mark one)

☐ Provide students with general knowledge  
☐ Prepare students for work in general  
☐ Prepare students for specific careers  
☐ Other __________________________ (specify)
18. In your opinion, how important is it for people to have a college degree in order to be successful?

- Extremely important
- Very important
- Not very important
- Not at all important

19. How well do you feel your high school is preparing you for each of the following? (Mark one for each item)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Extremely well</th>
<th>Somewhat well</th>
<th>Not well</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To gain admission to the college of your choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To succeed in college-level work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get a good job</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make you a more responsible citizen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Sample Consent Form

Title: The Way I See It

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Christine Dickason
Thewayiseeit.mississippi@gmail.com
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Description
“The Way I See It” is an honors senior thesis exploring college preparation and college aspirations in public high schools in the state of Mississippi. After receiving approval from the superintendent and principal of Northwest Rankin High School, we are asking selected students in the senior class to participate in focus groups and one-on-one interviews that will give us a better understanding of students’ views on college preparation and aspirations.

Cost and Payments
We expect the focus groups to take about 20 minutes to complete. One-on-one interviews may take more or less time, depending how the conversation flows and how much the student wants to talk. There is no compensation or cost.

Confidentiality
All participants who consent to participation will be video-recorded and featured in a documentary film. The film will be shown publicly in various venues and locations. Although the participant’s physical appearance will be in the documentary, the individual has control over the amount of information that he or she would like to share.

Right to Withdraw
You do not have to take part in this study and you may stop participation at any time. If you start the study and decide that you do not want to finish, all you have to do is to tell Kaitlyn Barton or Christine Dickason. You may skip any questions you prefer not to answer.

IRB Approval
This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or irb@olemiss.edu.

Statement of Consent
I have read and understand the above information. By signing below, I consent to participate in the study.

Name: ____________________________________________

Phone No.: ________________________________________

Signature: _________________________________________

Parent/Guardian Signature (if under 18): ________________
Appendix C: Sample Questions – Focus Groups and Individual Interviews

For focus groups:

1. Who is going to college? If you are, please tell us where and what you plan to study.

2. Do you think that your high school has prepared you for college?

3. What could your school do better to prepare you for college?

4. Who has had the biggest influence on your decision to go to college?

5. Do teachers talk about their college experiences with you?

For individual high school students:

1. Are you going to college? If so, where?

2. What are you most looking forward to in college?

3. What are you most nervous about in regards to college?

4. If you could change one thing about your high school, what would it be?

5. Do you feel prepared for college-level work? Why or why not?

6. What do you want to tell legislators in the state of Mississippi about your education?

For teachers and other professionals:

1. Do you think all students should go to college?

2. Teachers: Do you talk to your students about your college experiences?

3. Teachers: How has Common Core affected how you teach in the classroom?

4. Teachers: How do you reach all students in your class?

5. Senator: What is the role of the state legislature in education policy?