

# Red Light, Green Light: The Impact of Signals on the College Aspirations of Urban High School Students of Color

## 2. PROJECT ABSTRACT

The central purpose of this proposal is to understand the signals that urban students of color believe deter or inspire them to pursue a four-year college education. The urban setting for this proposed study is Denver, Colorado where the Denver Public School (DPS) system has a poor track record related to college access. Almost 80% of all DPS students are of color and less than 9% go on to complete a four-year college degree. Therefore, it is imperative we gain a better understanding of the signals that influence the college aspirations of these students. The study will utilize a signaling theory lens to qualitatively study students of color enrolled in the DPS at three high school sites. The study will develop best practice recommendations for guidance counselors and college enrollment management practitioners which aim to improve access to college for students of color in the DPS system.

### 3. PROJECT NARRATIVE

#### 3a. Research Description

Importance: Access to postsecondary education is a priority for state and federal policymakers as it not only provides socioeconomic equity but also promotes economic competitiveness (Hossler & Maple, 1993). According to empirical research, students form their college going aspirations early in high school (Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, 1989). However, for students of color in urban school districts, the lower their family income, the poorer their prospect for gaining access to higher education (Astin, 1982; Perna et al., 2008). This is the unfortunate reality in Denver, Colorado. According to Lee (2006), approximately 80% of all Denver Public School (DPS) students are minority, 70% are low income, and an average of 50% are eligible for a free or reduced lunch program. In 2002 only 43% of the students of color graduated from high school, which resulted in only 9% continuing on to complete a four-year college degree (Lee, 2006). These problematic statistics demand a better understanding of the barriers faced by urban students of color and signals and strategies for improving their access to a college education.

Goals: Tuitt, Sagaria and Turner (2007) propose a model of faculty hiring based on signaling theory to identify the challenges and best practices in recruiting and hiring diverse faculty. They note several national level macrovariables and institutional level microvariables which influence the job signaling process. Likewise, college choice is a complex interactional process where student and institutional characteristics interact to influence the decision making process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; DesJardins, Dundar & Hendel, 1999). The college choice process involves three primary stages—1) formation of college aspirations; 2) identification, selection, and application to a select number of colleges; and finally, 3) college enrollment and attendance (DesJardins et al., 1999). The grave access problem within the DPS system highlights the need to investigate the signals that promote or hinder the college choice process of urban students of color at the first stage i.e. of their college going aspirations. Thus, the central purpose of this study is to investigate how students of color enrolled in the DPS system identify and understand the

signals that may deter or inspire them to pursue a four-year college education. We will frame our study based on the signaling model proposed by Nobel laureate Michael Spence (1973), which suggests that communication occurs between institutions, the environment, and the students in the form of various signals that influence college going aspirations. The study will use a conceptual model where students' college going aspirations are shaped by interaction with four primary signal sources—Environmental, Institutional-High School, Institutional-Higher Education Institutions, and Personal (see Figure 1).

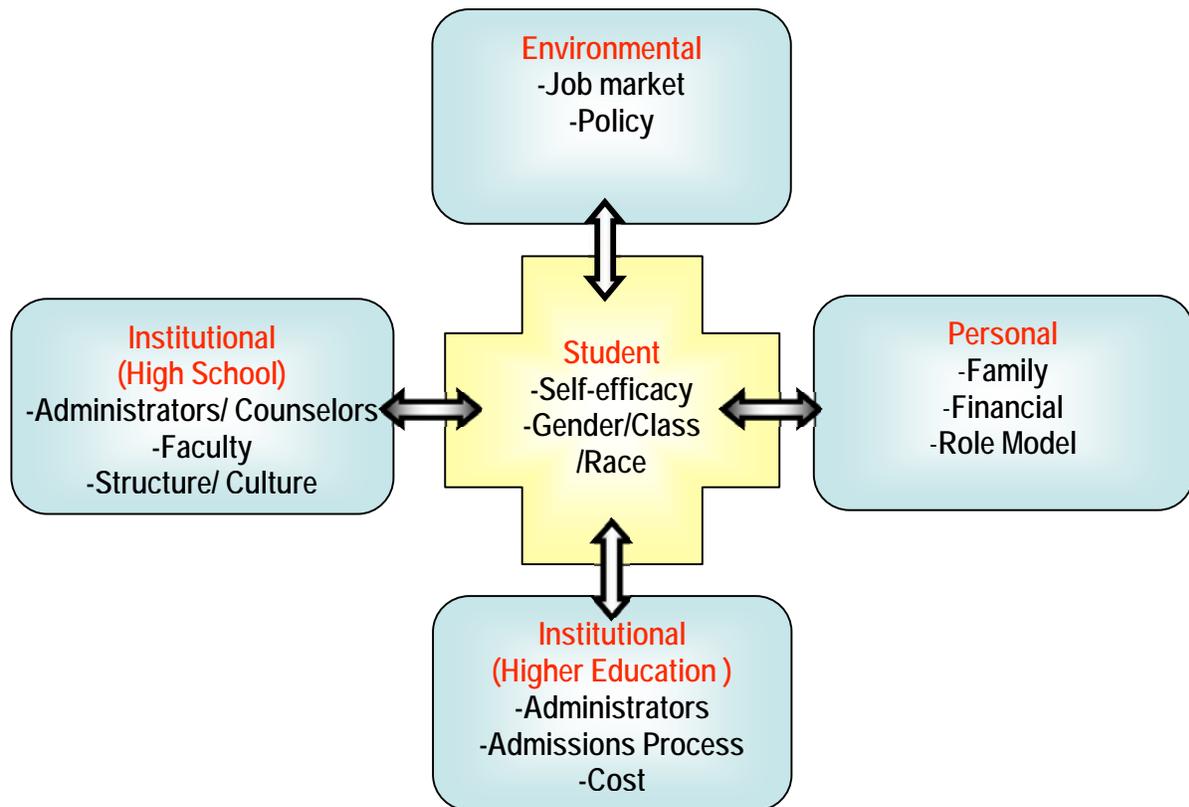


Figure 1. Conceptual model for interactions between student and signal sources

### 3b. Research Design

Who: The research team will be comprised of three advising faculty members (principal investigators) and three doctoral students (see Section 6, Researchers Vitas).

What: The goal of the study will be achieved through qualitative research methods. Due to the fact a majority of research in the area of enrollment management is quantitative; we feel there is a gap in studies that investigate the experiences of the students, through their own stories and words. Therefore, the proposed study will attempt to understand the experiences of the DPS high school students through a qualitative design.

How: The unit of analysis for the proposed study are adult high school students. We propose this study as a pilot study for a larger district level study. The study proposes to conduct focus group and individual interviews of DPS high school students of color in their senior year at three different sites. Qualitative interviewing is suitable for the proposed research as the purpose is to understand other person's perspective and experiences (Patton, 2002). In this case, the purpose is to understand the students' perspectives about their college going aspirations. Individual interviews will be conducted in an informal conversational format as they provide flexibility and responsiveness to individual differences (Patton, 2002). Focus groups will be conducted in a semi-structured format so that facilitation and interaction among participants is focused on the research questions (Patton, 2002). Interview protocol will be developed and interviews will be conducted by doctoral students. Two focus groups will be organized for each school with eight to ten participants in each group. Three to five students from each focus group will be invited for individual interviews. The duration for focus groups and individual interviews will be 90 minutes and 45 minutes respectively. Each of the doctoral students will be assigned one high school site to conduct the focus groups and individual interviews. Food and snacks will be provided as gratitude for participation. The recordings of all interviews will be professionally transcribed. Triangulation of the data will be achieved at both the data collection and data analyses stages. Data will be collected through the combination of focus groups and individual interviews. Data analyses of each focus group and individual interview will be completed separately by at least two members of the study to achieve consistency in coding and theme development. The research will be conducted in accordance with the Human Subjects requirements at DU.

Where and When:

The University of Denver has a partnership with the Denver Scholarship Foundation, which has assisted in identifying three high schools to serve as pilot sites for this study. Lincoln (80% Hispanic), Montbello (40% Hispanic & 51% African American), and South (40% Hispanic) high schools all report low ratings on standardized test performance and enrollment of students from low income families, resulting in a high percentage of students who receive free or reduced lunch.

School Name	Ethnic population served	% students on free or reduced lunch
Lincoln	80% Hispanic	71%
Montbello	40% Hispanic 51% African American	63%
South	40% Hispanic	45%

Interviews will be conducted during the spring term of the 2008 school year from April to June, 2008.

**3c. Planned Outcomes**

Best Practices Report: The end product will result in determining specific signals that urban students of color identify as influencing their aspirations to pursue a four-year college education. The study will provide insight to college access stakeholders including members of the DPS administration, counseling and teaching staff, college admissions professionals, and policymakers. It will also aid the research team in refining research design and interview protocol for larger district level study.

Presentations: The study results will be proposed for consideration at the National Association of College Advisors Association (NACAA), the National Student Affairs Professionals Association (NASPA), the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), and the American Education Research Association (AERA) annual conferences in 2009.

Future Funding and Programs: The research team intends to use the results of this proposed pilot study to extend the research agenda and conduct a district level study. We also intend to conduct 'gap analysis' to identify the gaps between the institutional intent of signals and students' perception of those signals.

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