

Cynthia Haiken  
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Human Information Behavior  
Term Paper

**Human Information Behavior of  
Parents with Children Embarking  
On the College Admissions Process**

**I. Introduction**

The annual frenzy that overwhelms high school seniors and their parents has just ended. May 1<sup>st</sup> is the date by which all decisions relating to where graduating high school seniors will attend college in the fall must be made. Newspapers have been filled with articles bemoaning the state of college admissions: the fact, for example, that Stanford University admitted only 5% of its applicant pool this year was national news (Perez-Pena, 2014). Students and parents alike are inundated with reports of the impossibility of being admitted to a select school and hear stories of the A student with perfect test scores who was rejected by every Ivy League school he applied to. Students must somehow make their way through this stressful process every year.

Studies suggest that parent views on and involvement in the college application process have significant impact on where their children choose to apply. “Parents play a pivotal role in forming students’ predispositions.” (Radford, 26). But how do parents learn about the college admissions process in order to provide guidance and support to their children as the students work their way through the stressors and complexities of deciding where to go to school? The number of applications has skyrocketed due to the ease of applying online via the Common Application. More and more students have 4.0 GPAs, perfect test scores, many extracurricular activities and advisors to help with essays, interviews and packaging. How do parents make

sense of the college admissions process as it exists today so that they can assist their children? So much of the focus is on providing information to the students themselves. This paper seeks to explore the information seeking behavior of parents as they attempt to understand today's college admissions process to guide their children through it. It will discuss the literature that exists on how parents seek and find information on the college admissions process, including dichotomies that have been identified based on socioeconomic factors and the degree of the parents' own level of education. It will then discuss the implications of this literature for information specialists and suggest ways in which information specialists can provide meaningful information on the college admissions process to parents in all socioeconomic classes in a way that is helpful and relevant.

## **II. Literature Review**

From just a cursory review of articles and books concerning the current state of college admissions, it is clear that parents are confronting a process that bears little resemblance to their own admissions cycle a generation ago. "The rules of college admission today seem confusing and even arcane....when adults gather socially, everyone seems to know someone who had been a sure thing for College X and who was then denied admission while 'less well-qualified' kids were not only accepted but admitted with hefty scholarships." (Jones and Ginsburg, 8). Parents serve as advisors and often as active advocates for their children (Elam, Stratton and Gibson, 22). In this capacity they need to educate themselves about the admissions process. Colleges long ago began to recognize the importance of parental views in shaping the college choices of their children and have factored parents' interests into the information they provide to applicants

Elam, Stratton and Gibson, 23). College websites now contain parent-oriented links providing answers to frequently asked questions. There are recruiting materials that are geared specifically to parent issues and concerns. During open house weekends, colleges provide seminars on financial aid and other activities that are for parents rather than for students.

In a study done in 1989 on parents and the college choice decision, parents were found to use and trust many different sources of information and to consider several different factors when evaluating colleges (Smith and Bers, 342). These sources of information were both written and oral. Written sources included college publications, such as catalogues, college newspapers and marketing brochures. Less formal sources of information included advice and anecdotes from friends and relatives, the college admissions staff, the high school guidance counselor, co-workers with older children and even friends of their child. In short, “parents were involved in their students’ decisions about college. They gathered information about college through reading college literature, attending open houses and college nights and discussing college options with friends and others. Parents relied on both written and word-of-mouth sources...” (Smith and Bers, 343). The study broke down parents’ use of information sources as follows:

SOURCES	PERCENT USING
<u>Personal Sources:</u>	
Friends and Relatives	45
Student	38
High School Counselor or Teacher	30
Friends of Students	17
College Staff	10
Spouse	6
Employee/Co-Worker	6
<u>Written Sources:</u>	
College Brochures	38
College Newsletter	33
College Catalog	24
Local Newspaper	17
Radio	1

An older study done in 1980 noted that college visits are very important to information gathering by parents and that first impressions during these visits, often at the admissions office before a tour, are particularly relevant. (Reynolds, 28). In focusing on upper middle class families, the study found that these parents felt that they had a good amount of college admissions guidance available to them, via meetings with the high school's college counselor, the school-provided college guidance handbook, guest speakers, college choice nights sponsored by the high school, and resource materials from libraries and bookstores, along with a variety of sources for information on financial aid. This study found that parents trusted college literature more than any other source of information. This in part stems from the view that the most important factors in choosing a college for their child are the strengths of the academic programs offered and the faculty at a specific college as well as the quality of life on campus. Parents gather information on the first two items from literature the college distributes and on the last item during the campus visit.

These two articles discussed information gathering behavior for parents in the context of suggesting improvements in college marketing materials aimed at parents who are significant factors in the decision-making process of their children about college choices. However, more recent studies that analyze parent information-seeking behavior in the context of the college admissions process have focused on the socioeconomic disparity of the information that such parents have and the way they search for it. The Radford study states starkly that research demonstrated that "parents' likelihood of having a strong understanding increases with social class." (Radford, 59). Radford's work, which focused on the influence of social class on the college decision process of high school valedictorians, noted that while 69% of high school valedictorians who had been identified in the study as belonging to the upper income bracket had

parents who were well-informed about the college admissions process, that number dropped to 51% for middle class parents and 28% for lower income parents. Radford's findings also showed that lower income parents were less likely than more affluent parents to be involved in the process itself (Radford, 60). This pattern continued in the context of gathering information about financial aid. Radford's study found that "parents' knowledge of financial aid and their involvement in learning about it varied largely by social class....less affluent parents were less involved in the financial aid process than were more affluent parents." (Radford, 63). The students in middle and upper income households noted that "their parents took charge of the entire financial aid process for them...parents were the individuals attending information sessions, going online, and contacting colleges to find out about financial aid." (Radford 63). However, none of the students in lower income households reported that their parents were actively involved in learning about financial aid programs at either the federal level or from the colleges and universities that the student was interested in. In fact, in lower income households, Radford noted that students were primarily responsible for gathering information about financial aid rather than their parents (Radford, 68).

Parents' lack of information on financial aid has been found to have a stronger impact on student college choice than parents' lack of information on the college admissions process more generally. Radford noted that inaccurate perceptions about the availability of financial aid caused parents to limit the types of universities that their students considered, and that up to 40% of parents eliminated certain colleges based solely on concerns about cost (Radford, 66). Radford's study found that while 57% of higher income families were well informed about financial aid, that number drops to 47% for middle income families and 28% for lower income

families. As Radford noted, “this result suggests that less affluent families’ socioeconomic status is highly related to their financial aid knowledge.” (Radford, 67).

After assessing parent knowledge of the college admissions process in general and of the availability of financial aid more specifically, Radford’s study turned to an analysis of how parents gathered information about specific college options available to their children. As with her earlier findings, Radford concluded that parental support in exploring the specific options open to high school valedictorians varied based on the socioeconomic status of the parents. Higher income parents tended to be very involved in helping their children gather information about specific colleges. This involvement took two forms: the first was the provision of the tools to help the students in their search. Such tools included purchasing college guidebooks and helping to arrange and pay for college visits. Higher income parents put their children in contact with colleagues, friends and relatives who attended a college the student might be interested in. The second way that higher income parents demonstrated their support was in exploring college options for their children on their own by doing their own research on various colleges (either by reading guidebooks or by exploring college information materials online and in print) and then making suggestions to their children about colleges to consider (Radford, 82).

By contrast, middle income parents were shown to be less likely to offer opinions about the type of college their children might attend. What was most relevant to this group of parents was that their child should attend an accredited four-year university, not that their child should attend one in particular (Radford, 84). Middle income parents were also more likely to place geographic boundaries on where their children went to school than higher income parents. As noted above, middle income parents were more likely than higher income parents to exclude certain colleges from consideration based solely on their perceptions of the prohibitive nature of

the costs associated with attending a certain school: “While a couple of middle-[income] parents encouraged their children to apply to at least one prestigious private institution, a larger number of middle-[income] parents discouraged even considering these universities, frequently citing cost. It is important to highlight that these cost fears may be based on lack of adequate knowledge of financial aid.” (Radford, 85).

Not surprisingly, Radford found that lower income families were the least likely to suggest specific colleges or types of colleges for their children. Any suggestion made by these parents tended to focus on schools that were very close to home; Radford found that “proximity was more important than a university’s reputation or whether the college was a two- or four-year institution.” (Radford, 85). It was not uncommon for lower income families to suggest that their children live at home while attending college. Such parents also were likely to prefer a college that they believed would be less expensive. Children in lower income families said that their parents never researched specific colleges or provided college materials or the resources to take trips to visit colleges, even those close to home. “One low-[income] valedictorian with parents who wanted him to attend the college located closest to home, which happened to be a community college, reported: ‘My parents didn’t want me to go anywhere else, so they didn’t want to drive anywhere [to visit].’” (Radford, 83).

Similar patterns were found in a study done in 2004 by Michael Kurst and Andrea Venezia that focused on the type of information available to and received by parents of college-bound students in states such as California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland and Oregon. The study found little difference in information gathering due to geographic location but significant differences due to socioeconomic status. For example, the study found that there was a strong correlation between the quality of the high school that the child attended and the level and

accuracy of parent knowledge of items related to the college admissions process. Approximately 75% of higher income parents obtained accurate and extensive information about the college admissions process. This number dropped to approximately 66% for middle income parents and below 50% for lower income parents (Kurst and Venezia, 293). While all parents overestimated the costs associated with college attendance, upper class parents were more likely than middle and lower class parents to have a more accurate view of college costs and financial aid. When the study looked at specific levels of parent engagement in college-related activities at school, it found that there was a large gap in parental involvement between higher income and lower income families across a wide range of events, including visiting college campuses, looking at college web sites, reading news articles, reading college brochures and embarking on a specific college savings financial plan. Higher income families were three to as much as seven times more likely to participate in these information gathering activities than lower income families (Kurst and Venezia, 145).

Kurst and Venezia found that distinctions in information gathering behavior not only existed among parents of different socioeconomic levels but also existed among parents with different levels of education. The gap described in the immediately preceding paragraph in parental involvement in the college search process also existed between parents whose level of education included a graduate degree and parents who did not attend college, although the disparity was less pronounced. Kurst and Venezia found that parents with graduate degrees were two to four times more likely to be actively involved in the college search process than parents who had not gone to college (Kurst and Venezia, 145). This distinction had also been noted in a study done by Litten in 1982, which found that

higher levels of parental education led to substantially greater incidence of usage of commercial guidebooks and visits to campuses. Slightly higher levels of use of



college admissions officers and unrelated alumni were represented with greater levels of parental education. On the other hand, children of less educated parents were more likely than their peers to report receiving information via unrequested publications, as well as from high school counselors (Litten, 394).

A similar trend was observed in a 1994 study which found that “students with more highly educated parents report greater reliance on their parents as sources of information, especially during the busiest times of the process...students who have reason to expect that their parents are relatively knowledgeable about higher education rely more heavily on their parents’ opinions and information.” (Galotti and Mark, 604). Studies have shown that parents who have a college degree are significantly more likely than parents who did not graduate from college to be engaged and involved in the gathering of college-related information at three critical stages of the process: developing a list of potential colleges, completing the college applications and deciding which college to attend (Litten, 395).

In *Crazy U: One Dad’s Crash Course in Getting his Kid into College*, Andrew Ferguson provided a case study of how one parent from the upper middle class gathered information relating to the college admissions process when his oldest son was a junior and then a senior in high school. Ferguson’s experience illustrated by example the results of the research described above for a parent in his socioeconomic class. He described his own arc of information gathering about the college application experience, beginning with a review of the college viewbooks which arrived in the mail during his son’s junior year and moving from there to a first meeting with the college counselor at his son’s high school, the decision whether or not to hire a private college counselor, a review of both the US News and World Report annual college rankings and a description of various colleges in the popular college guidebooks, research on tutors for taking SATs and for writing college admissions essays, and the effort involved to become knowledgeable about various sources of financial aid.

Ferguson noted that parents who found the high school college advisor to be unavailable or overworked simply educated themselves so that they could educate their children. Ferguson started his own education with the US News and World Report college rankings that are available for free online. He also reviewed several of the most popular college guidebooks (Ferguson, 54). Ferguson engaged in what he called “cyber self-education” by spending hours on an online site called College Confidential, the largest and most popular information resource for college admissions on the web (Ferguson 64). College Confidential provides information via message board posts on admissions statistics at every major college and university in the country, along with views on standardized tests, essays and extra-curricular activities. “What it is, is a Web site where people from all walks of life, from every income level and background, create a communal space without fear of reprisal and in a spirit of perfect openness...” (Ferguson 65). Ferguson also spent time on the website Inside Higher Education and followed regular news reports on admissions data. In addition to purchasing several college guidebooks, he researched and bought books on how to write college admissions essays and books that provided support and preparation for standardized tests. Ferguson not only researched which books to purchase, he read them along with his son. Ferguson took his son on several college visits, they attended college information sessions hosted by his son’s high school and others that were publicized for the broader community.

Ferguson described in some detail the amount of time he spent trying to learn about and understand the availability of financial aid. He found websites from the College Board and the Department of Education to be the most helpful and authoritative. He noted: “By the time I was through collecting material about college costs, I had enough documents to make several impressive new stacks in the dining room. There were booklets, worksheets, request forms,

disclaimers, power points, suggested guidelines, official guidelines, disclosures, charts, backgrounders, tables, monthly planners, and FAQs beyond number.” (Ferguson, 159). Ferguson’s information gathering on this topic underscores that becoming knowledgeable about financial aid availability requires a significant investment of time, resources and skills.

Interestingly, Ferguson noted that much of the information he gathered during the college admissions process, including information on how to find other information, was obtained from other parents during social gatherings on the weekends. He described how small clusters of parents would detach themselves from the larger group social gathering of suburban parents on a Saturday night or Sunday afternoon and start talking about college admissions. “We craved companionship and comfort, exchanged gossip, news, questions and complaints, sought solace, advice and a chance to spy on the competition.” (Ferguson 103). This “Kitchen Group,” as Ferguson called it, was the source not only of useful information but also of misinformation. Parents shared anecdotes about superbly qualified students who were not admitted to Ivy League schools while less well qualified students (often minorities) were admitted. There was solace in finding out that others were having trouble convincing their child to start drafting the admissions essays or to study harder for the SATs or to make plans to visit a few more college campuses. However, some parents would boast about their child’s perfect SAT scores or extraordinary extracurricular activities, causing feelings of panic or inadequacy in parents whose child’s grades, test scores and activities were solid but not exceptional. The Kitchen Group depicted by Ferguson provided a community of people whose shared experiences helped make them feel more educated and less isolated but also fostered growing anxiety about choosing the right school, getting in and affording it.

### III. Implications for Information Specialists

The review of the research literature on the information seeking behavior of parents whose children are embarking on the college admissions process illustrates two broad categories or methods for information gathering. The first, practiced generally by parents in the higher socioeconomic or educational classes, stems from an awareness of a lack of information relating to a subject of extreme importance to them: how to identify appropriate colleges for their children and how best to assist their children in being admitted to (and affording) those colleges. The second, which applies more generally to parents in lower socioeconomic classes, is based on Chatman's theory of information poverty and closed groups. Both groups also engage in social constructivist behavior where they gather information through a shared language of terms related to college admission within the social context of their everyday lives. Information specialists can be helpful to parents in either group and can provide information in a way that is particularly responsive to the characteristics and needs of these two parental types.

All parents with students who are embarking on the college admissions process are in a very specific situation at a specific point in time: they are parents of 16-17 year old children who have a prescribed path of high school courses, standardized tests and applications, a time frame in which to complete these items, along with college visits, meetings with advisors, interviews and other additional elements of the college search process which take time, energy and money. The situational context for this information gathering among parents in upper and upper-middle socioeconomic classes creates precisely the type of information need that Brenda Dervin describes in her article on sense-making. "Individual use of information and information systems is responsive to situational conditions as defined by that individual. In essence, the

individual defines and attempts to bridge discontinuities or gaps.” (Dervin 1992, 66). There is discontinuity in the way in which these parents understand the process of applying to and being admitted to college when they were 18 and the way they are told the process works today. Parents take specific steps to make sense of the new rules and the new process to resolve this discontinuity. The data is available, but each parents brings to this information his or her own way of looking at it in the context of the child and the relative conditions (academic interest and skill level, financial, geographic) of the search. “It is assumed that the individual constructs ideas of these moments, that these constructings are themselves strategies, that these constructings are sometimes repetitions of ideas used in the past and sometimes newly created because of how the individual defines the new situation.” (Dervin 1992, 66). Thus there are gaps in parent knowledge about college admissions, and this knowledge gap is situational, temporal and bound in context because parents’ need for this knowledge exists as their child approaches his or her senior year of high school. Information seeking behavior is a search for continuity. Parents attempt to bridge their gaps in knowledge through the process of gathering and absorbing and using information to create understanding about college admissions.

Information specialists can use the sense-making techniques that Dervin describes to understand the specific situation that these parents are in and the gap in knowledge that parents want to close. Parents may have broad questions about the process, about the elements of the application, about financial aid or about the purported degree of difficulty of being admitted to top-rated schools. Questions may also be more narrow: parents may be focused on one aspect of the application: the essay, or the SATs, or the interview. They may have financial aid questions that are specific to the options available at one or two schools. Information specialists who understand the context in which these questions are being asked, the stress level inherent in the

situation and the desire of parents to obtain this information in order to be helpful to their children will be best able to provide information in a way that gives encouragement, a sense of direction and a path forward towards bridging the gap.

Unlike parents in higher socioeconomic classes or parents who have college degrees, parents from lower socioeconomic classes or parents who did not continue their education after high school do not generally feel that there is a discontinuity that can be solved with information. As the Radford study suggests, these parents often do not believe that college is necessary or even beneficial for their children (Radford, 130). They also feel that college is not something the family can afford, even if it might be worthwhile. These parents operate in what Elfreda Chatman has described as a closed group of insiders with a shared “common cultural, social, religious, etc., perspective. It is these common experiences that provide expected norms of behavior and ways to approach the world.” (Chatman, 194). Chatman asserts that these so-called insiders shield themselves from the resources they need to gather the information that would expand their information universe (Radford, 130). In Chatman’s theory of information poverty, an identified group (here, the group of lower income parents who do not appreciate the benefit of higher education for their children) does not feel it has access to resources and further believes that those outside the group limit the group’s access to such resources. Chatman theorizes that the group uses self-protective behaviors to conform to social norms, does not trust others to provide relevant information and will not risk exposing the information need. It is only when information is viewed as relevant to an everyday problem or concern that members of this group are open to the introduction of new knowledge (Chapman, 197-198).

There are many factors that would cause lower income parents to avoid becoming knowledgeable about their children’s college application process. They may truly believe that a

college education is not worth the expense, they may want their children to enter the workforce to provide additional income for the family, or they may be unwilling to let their children move away from home. In addition, for parents who perceive that college could be beneficial for their child, there may be significant concern that the family will not be able to afford to send the child to college and thus a desire to avoid disappointment by downplaying the importance of the process. Radford's research suggested that "low-[income] parents often impeded their children's ability to investigate college options." (Radford, 83) She noted that "less-affluent families' socioeconomic status is highly related to their financial aid knowledge." (Radford, 67). The Kurst and Venezia study showed that parents in lower income families were much less likely to discuss college options with their children and much more likely to overestimate the costs to the family of college attendance than parents in higher income families (Kurst and Venezia, 71 and 145). A study by Dianne Reay found that even in lower income families where there was an interest in sending children to college, the process of learning was overwhelming. Those parents found college admissions information "dense and indecipherable." (Reay, 523).

Thus there are barriers in place that prevent this group of parents from seeking and obtaining information about college admissions. These barriers are cultural, economic and psychological. The challenge for the information specialist is first to help this group of parents to understand that access to information about the college admissions process can be relevant to their daily lives. Once parents perceive that the information need is there, the next step would be to provide information in a way that is understandable without being overwhelming. It would be important to highlight the variety of financial aid options available in order to ease concerns about cost. One approach might be to make a connection with the student at school, provide helpful information to the student and urge the student to share this information with his or her

parents, potentially encouraging parents to come to school to meet with the librarian there to be shown relevant college-related materials.

What parents across all socioeconomic classes appear to have in common is a social context for their understanding of and discussion of the college admissions process. Ferguson's "Kitchen Group" of parents who separate from a large group social gathering to huddle in the kitchen and talk about college admissions is an example of this. In this group, they share what they have heard about college admissions and what they are doing about college admissions, as well as their anxieties and concerns. They find comfort in the commonality of their experiences and speak in a language that is unique to the college admissions process, using words such as "Common Ap" "ACT" "early decision" and "FAFSA" which have no relevance outside of this group. Similarly, in the tight-knit circle of blue collar families where the adult generation did not attend college, emphasis within the community is on children staying close to home, getting a job and starting families of their own. Here, the social discourse, while different in context, is no less binding and impactful. In a paper on social constructivism, Talja noted the "the user's embeddedness in culturally bound discourses. Information is not seen as that which instructs, but as messages produced within specific historical and cultural contexts and specific social interests." (Talja, 12). For lower income parents, their social context is one that devalues college education and believes that the costs associated with attending college create barriers to entry. The group's social identity is based on geographic proximity, cohesiveness and family. Information pertaining to college admissions is less relevant to the every day life experience of these parents.

Information specialists can be most helpful to these social clusters of information gathering by recognizing their existence and the power of the context in which the information is



received and embraced. If information is presented within the social context in which these groups live or otherwise made available for members of the groups to access, it is more likely to be absorbed and processed. If instead information is provided in a more dominant fashion, it may be ignored or resented. In the context of lower income families, it may be easier to provide information to the student, who will already have access to information from social contexts outside of the home (such as school or extra-curricular groups) and thus may understand that there is misinformation among parents about college costs and benefits. By contrast, Ferguson's Kitchen Group suffers from a glut of information and a lack of sufficient knowledge and context to separate accurate information from misinformation. This social group is looking for concrete data and information on all aspects of the college admissions process and will embrace with enthusiasm any advice that is credible. Information specialists who wish to provide useful information and attempt to clarify misinformation among social groups such as Ferguson's Kitchen Group can make such information available in a manner that demonstrates its reliability.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

An astonishing amount of information is available to parents about all aspects of the college admissions process. Some of it is valuable, fact-oriented and geared towards the concerns parents typically have. Other information lacks credibility and is based on rumors and gossip. And still more information falls somewhere in between those two ends of the spectrum. Parents in higher income brackets tend to have a ready-made infrastructure of guidance, data and support to help them gather and assess the information available. They also have the resources to hire outside advisors and tutors, make visits to colleges, and purchase guidebooks and other

helpful documents. More importantly, these parents have the context to value a college education and to be active partners in the process of getting their children into college. This context comes from several sources: it is historical (they attended college), professional (all their colleagues attended college) and social (everyone in the neighborhood attended college). Parents in lower income brackets do not typically have this infrastructure of guidance and information, both because their children's school lacks it and because the social context of their lives devalues it.

Dervin has written that "knowing is a product of some inextricable combination of human action, human predisposition, and that elusive thing called reality." (Dervin 2003, 116). Parents whose children are embarking on the college admissions process come to this time in their lives with predispositions about the benefits of college, the associated costs, and a sense of what the reality is or should be for their children. Parents take these preconceived ideas and act on them in a way that makes sense to them within the contexts of their lives and the social groupings in which they live. Sometimes this information is helpful, fact-specific and reliable. Other times, it is hyperbole, rumor and inaccurate. Parents collect this information at a time of stress and in a context filled with competition and a desire to provide the best alternatives for their children. But this notion of what is "best" is determined based on the information available to them, which in turn is based, at least in part, on the information they are willing to receive, absorb and process.

Information specialists have the skills to help provide relevant information about the college admissions process in a way that makes it more likely that such information will be taken in by parents. They can do this by attempting to discern the socioeconomic and social clusters which provide context and background for the parents' information needs and using their

knowledge of the approaches and thought-processes which inform the information seeking behavior of these groups. Some parents will be eager for all information, some will want the information but feel unqualified to use it properly and some will be disinterested. Information specialists can anticipate these disparate attitudes towards gathering information about college choice and guide patrons accordingly. This may mean helping them to weed out misinformation or simply providing them with a small number of relevant and approachable documents. It is through recognition of the different contexts which bring parents and their children to this information need that librarians can be most effective in helping close the gap and make what is a stressful and challenging time a bit easier to understand and manage.

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