ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH
Data and Decisions for Higher Education

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PROPOSAL DETAILS

Personal Information	
Name	Ms. Bernadette Doykos
Informal Name	Bernadette
Affiliation	Vanderbilt University
Unit/Department	Human & Organizational Development
Title	Student
Year began this position	2009
Email	bernadette.doykos@vanderbilt.edu
Alternate Email	bdoykos@gmail.com
Cell Phone	603-303-0468
Preferred Mailing Address	1414 Fatherland Street Nashville, Tennessee 37206-2912 United States Phone: 603-303-0468
Secondary Address	Box 90, Peabody College 230 Appleton Place Nashville, Tennessee 37203 United States Fax: (615) 322-1141

Faculty Advisor	
Name	Dr. Kimberly D. Bess
Informal Name	
Institution / Affiliation	Vanderbilt University
Unit / Department	Human & Organizational Development
Title	Assistant Professor
Preferred Mailing Address	Mayborn 102D
	230 Appleton Place
City	Nashville
Country	United States
State	Tennessee
Zip/Postal Code	37203
Email	kimberly.d.bess@vanderbilt.edu
Phone	(615) 343-7946

Fax

Financial Representative

Name	Ms. Sandy Strohl
Informal Name	
Institution / Affiliation	Vanderbilt University
Unit / Department	Human & Organizational Development
Title	Administrative Officer
Preferred Mailing Address	Peabody College at Vanderbilt, Box 90, GPC
City	Nashville
Country	United States
State	Tennessee
Zip/Postal Code	37203
Email	sandy.strohl@vanderbilt.edu
Phone	615-343-3879
Fax	615-322-1141

Project Description I

Title:

Multiple Levers, Multiple Settings: Unpacking the Mechanisms for the Acquisition of Information and Support about the College Application Process among Traditionally Underrepresented College-Going Youth

Statement of the research problem and national importance:

Throughout the last thirty years, the expansion of the postsecondary education sector has resulted in historic enrollment rates. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of traditionally aged students (18-24) enrolled in college increased by12% (NCES, 2012). The proliferation of students pursuing higher education is due, in large part, to the changing nature of the American economy. Deindustrialization and the rapid rise of globalism vastly decreased the number of living-wage employment options for individuals with a high school diploma or less (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009). However, despite indicators of increased matriculation, disparities in college access persist between students from traditionally underrepresented college-going populations, including first generation, low income, and minority students, and their more privileged peers.

Today's economy in the United States privileges a postsecondary degree in many ways. The most often cited advantage is access to future economic opportunity: graduates of both two-year and four-year degrees earn substantially more than their peers who terminated their education at high school graduation (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005). In 1973, 72% of the share of all jobs required a high school diploma or less; however, that number is projected to decrease by one half by 2020 (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Hanson, 2012). However, the advantage affiliated with a postsecondary degree extends beyond the financial benefits. Research shows that individuals who pursued postsecondary education also voted at higher rates, demonstrated better health outcomes, and experienced significantly lower rates of incarceration (McPherson & Schapiro, 2006). High rates of college success have substantial implications for the long-term well-being of individuals and their families, but with higher rates of productivity and the buffering effect against multiple risk factors, there are also major benefits for the broader society (O'Connor, 2000).

Students who attend high schools in predominantly low-income, urban communities continue to be less likely than their more affluent and suburban peers to enroll in institutions of higher education (Avery & Hoxby, 2012; Kurlaender & Flores, 2005; Martinez & Klopott, 2005). In 1970,

51% of all high school graduates enrolled in a four-year college for some period following high school by age 23 and that figure increased to 67% by 1999. However, despite substantial overall increases in college enrollment, marked disparities, attributable to race, class, and location persist (NCES, 2012). For instance, Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) estimate that only 21% of the lowest socioeconomic quartile applied to a 4-year college their senior year, as compared with 76% of their highest quartile peers. Similarly, Jackson (2012) estimates that 70% of White high school graduates attend some college, in comparison to 60% and 50% of African Americans and Hispanics, respectively. Finally, despite overall soaring rates of college participation, cumulative completion rates remained essentially equivalent (23% in 1970 compared to 24% in 1999).

Postsecondary enrollment statistics are only one indicator of inequality affiliated with college access; research shows that students from traditionally underrepresented college-going populations face continued barriers to success upon enrolling in college, and, subsequently, disparities still exist related to college completion (Kuerlander and Flores, 2005). Nearly 24% of White adults over 25 report achieving a bachelor's degree, compared to only 12% of African Americans and 9% of Latinos (Kurlaender & Flores, 2005). Although college access is often spoken of globally, signifying that college enrollment is sufficient to jumpstart momentum out of poverty for traditionally underrepresented populations, there is evidence of intensive tiering of quality of options. Such tiering is evident both between 2-year and 4-year colleges and among 4-year schools (such as public state universities versus Ivy League and predominantly white institutions). White students receive more prestigious—and more profitable—four-year degrees at a rate approximately two times that of their African American and Latino peers (Kurlaender & Flores, 2005). In sum, these various statistics indicate that there are massive disparities confronting low income and minority youth and their postsecondary aspirations and achievement.

Review the literature and establish a theoretical grounding for the research:

Students from low-income, urban neighborhoods encounter a number of obstacles that obstruct their path to college (Furstenberg & Neumark, 2007). This cumulative disadvantage can be broken down into three major categories: academic preparation, financial preparation, and access to college knowledge. These continuing inequalities impact college access in diverse ways and span students' multiple spheres of influence, including family, schools, and neighborhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

However, he majority of reform efforts adopt a predominantly merit-oriented and student-centered approach to policy and localized intervention, reinforcing the philosophy that if individual students work hard, they will enroll and succeed in a postsecondary institution (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000). However, this framework explicitly ignores the fact that the path to college is complex, and that students face a variety of potential barriers at the individual, familial, and institutional levels en route to higher education (Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Masse et al., 2010; Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls, 1997; Stanton Salazar, 1997; Wilson, 1990).

Thus, in order to successfully navigate postsecondary admissions, students require a diverse toolkit of information as well as an array of academic and nonacademic skills and resources (Conley, 2007; McDonough, 1997, 2005). The development of this toolkit must begin in the early years of high school, and continue to build (Galotti, 2001; Perna & Asha Cooper, 2006; Savitz-Romer & Boufard, 2012). An early start helps bolster youth assets, buffer potential obstacles, and takes the whole youth experience into consideration, fostering the resilience and skills necessary for success (Espinoza, 2011; Savitz-Romer & Boufard, 2012).

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) proposed a model of college choice that identifies three distinct components of the process: predisposition, search, and college choice. Perna (2006) extended this seminal model by introducing social and cultural capital and their role in informing students' progression through the three phases. With this, she identifies continuing levers of inequality that limit students' exposure to diverse opportunities and resources that limited their likelihood of success. She concludes that first generation students and African American and Latino students are less likely than their peers to enroll in higher education, and when they do, they often restrict the schools to which they apply based upon perceived costs.

A number of studies have examined influences on students from traditionally underrepresented college-going populations to pursue postsecondary aspirations. For example, Asha Cooper (2008) analyzes college aspirations among students and how they develop between 10th and 12th grades using the NELS dataset. The author combines economic (importance of cost and perceptions of 4-year public school tuition) and sociological (social and cultural capital) theories to predict college aspirations across racial and ethnic minority youth. The study finds that first generation college-going students are more likely to decide to go to college later in high school, which has potentially detrimental impacts their

transcript, course load, and preparedness for standardized tests. Relatedly, Museus and his colleagues (2010) comment that students' educational aspirations constantly evolve throughout their high school experience. In part, this is due to the evolution of identity that occurs throughout adolescence (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Thus, it is critical to acknowledge that college preparatory work must be an ongoing process of "developing and sustaining [students'] postsecondary aspirations" (Asha Cooper, 2008, p. 64).

Students make sense of whether or not college is a realistic option throughout their educational experience. For example, first generation students may identify barriers that may limit their aspirations towards specific educational and career expectations (O'Connor, 2000). Similarly, they may perceive themselves as "not the college type" and receive reinforcing messages from a variety of sources, including their peers, school personnel, and other influential individuals in their neighborhood (Espinoza, 2011; Oakes et al., 2002). The ways in which this influences access is further compounded by the fact that students often justify their particular goals in the context of what they see modeled in their surroundings (Espinoza, 2001; Wilson, 1990).

With limited role models to reinforce career and educational goals and provide support, postsecondary aspirations may be tempered. In one study, Hill (2008) uses data from the High School Effectiveness Study to explore the power of "college linking" strategies. The data led to two primary conclusions. First, some students who aspire to a four-year college do not take the necessary steps to apply, and those who do and get in do not always enroll. Second, low-income urban students often conduct a restricted college search and default to the application behaviors of their peers. As a result, Hill (2008) identifies "undermatch"—defined as students enrolling in postsecondary institutions for which they are overqualified—as an issue of major concern.

In their recent study, Avery and Hoxby (2012) expand upon Hill's findings, examining the application behaviors of high achieving youth (classified as scoring in the top 10% of all test-takers). The study concludes that students from upper income families are significantly more likely to apply to highly selective institutions than their lower income peers. Additionally, the authors assess differences between "income-typical" (e.g. their behaviors were in line with their peers of similar class background) and "achievement-typical" (e.g. their behaviors were aligned with students who boasted a similar academic record, regardless of class) students. The authors demonstrate that the second group was concentrated in school and neighborhood environments that offered expanded exposure to individuals who had attended a selective institution. However, students in "achievement-typical" group were more likely to have access to a variety of individuals from whom they received information and support about the process of applying to college.

In combination, the extant literature demonstrates the importance of ready access to extensive institutional information and comprehensive support systems that help students make sense of such information. Such processes must help students identify institutions that will serve as academically, socially, and financially feasible postsecondary options. In order to examine this, future research must explore how students' global networks facilitate their access to institutional information that helps inform their postsecondary decision-making. Existing research largely focuses on individual behaviors and the importance of dyadic relationships (e.g. between students and counselors); however, we must focus on developing students' systems of support.

Describe the research method that will be used:

As stated in the literature review, there is currently limited research that examines how students' global support networks across home, school, and community settings facilitate their paths to college. Many studies examine the influence of students' specific dyadic relationships, such as with teachers, counselors, or external mentors, and their role in encouraging and supporting postsecondary goals (Espinoza, 2011; McDonough, 1997, 2005). Existing research shows that adolescents with less dense networks demonstrate increased potential for resilience, as the networks offer many potential points of information and resource flow (Haynie, 2001). One component of social capital that flows through students' support networks is institutional knowledge, as it helps students make informed decisions, identifying a postsecondary setting that will best suit their financial, social, and academic needs (Conley, 2007). However, such informational systems are often complicated, and synthesizing their contents often proves to be overwhelming. This is particularly true for students who have limited access to individuals with personal familiarity and experience with system of higher education. Therefore, students from traditionally disadvantaged populations rely heavily on a diverse range of sources for information and assistance throughout this process, but little is known about how these varied mechanisms support of support serve to supplement and reinforce one

another. The proposed study asks the following questions:

1. Who constitutes students' perceived networks of support throughout the college access process?

2. What types of support do particular types of alters provide to students?

3. How do students make sense of information about higher education options from diverse sources across multiple lifespaces in order to make informed decisions about their postsecondary decisions?

4. Is there evidence that students who apply to different types of schools (2-year, 4-year public, 4-year private) access information about college in different ways?

Through this mixed methods inquiry, I seek to will unpack who (e.g. teachers, peers, family members, external mentors) students rely on for what types of support (information, emotional, instrumental) and how that support ultimately translates to making decisions about postsecondary education.

In order to pursue these questions, I will employ a mixed methods approach. First, I will conduct a social network analysis to examine students' perceptions of their global systems of support. The sample will include high school seniors (n=100) who attend two traditionally underperforming high schools in a southeastern city. To be included, students must have applied to at least one institution of higher education. One school offers an onsite afterschool program that provides academic and college preparatory activities. It also partners with a community organization to provide supplemental college counseling through part-time staff. The other school opted out of the supplemental college counseling program, as the guidance counselor believed that it would not substantially improve the experience for the students at the high school.

Previous research demonstrates that social network analysis helps clarify the flow of various forms of capital through an individual's network of support (Granovetter, 1973; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Each student will complete an ego network activity. First, participants will be asked to generate a list of the individuals upon whom they rely for support throughout the college access process (Knoke & Yang, 2008; Lin, 1999). I will ask the students to provide some demographic information about each person that they list, including their age, highest level of educational attainment (in the case of similarly aged peers, whether or not the student plans on going to college), how they know the individual (e.g. family member, teacher, coach), and whether or not the person lives in their neighborhood.

Once students exhaust the list of supportive alters, I will ask about the specific types of support that the listed individuals provide to the student. Thus, I will employ social network analysis to examine the individuals that students cite as playing an essential role in providing them with various types of support (House, 1982). Specifically, I will ask about which alters provided support in the following domains:

1. informational (i.e. who provided information about multiple institutions, who helped identify the qualifications required by target institutions)
2. instrumental (i.e. who provided technical assistance with applications, who brought them to visit college campuses)
3. emotional (i.e. who they would speak to when they felt stress about the process, who were the first people that they told when they got their admissions notifications)

Additionally, I will ask students to identify the individuals to whom they relayed support about the college access process, and how. The inclusion of this reciprocal tie moves the graduate from a role as a passive recipient to an active agent of support. Finally, I will ask participants to identify connections among the actors included in their networks to assess the flow of information and resources and the overall density (Granovetter, 1973). Analyses will be conducted with UCINET, a social network analysis software (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002).

Next, students will complete an extended semi-structured interview to further gauge the experience of gathering information about colleges, identifying which schools emerged as a quality fit for their academic and career goals, and the specifics of their application process. This interview will allow students to recount their experience in their own words (Fine, Torre, Burns, & Payne, 2007). In addition to gathering information about *who* students relied upon for support, and for *what kind*, this interview will also be an opportunity for participants to retrospectively assess their process of applying to college and allow for an opportunity to provide constructive information about what they may have done differently and what may serve as potential areas of additional support. I will also ask students about any unexpected barriers with which they were confronted and any other surprises that they encountered along the way.

Utilizing a mixed methods approach will allow for the triangulation of data that will illuminate a complete picture of the participant's college information gathering and application processes. Additionally, a comparative analysis of participants' social network maps and interview data

will be completed in an effort to understand the individual characteristics that exist among diverse groups.

Uploaded Appendix Document(s):

Project Description II

Will you use NCES target dataset? No

Please check all NCES datasets that apply

Explain why each dataset best serves this research. Include a variable list for each dataset used.

Will you use NSF target dataset? No

Explain why each dataset best serves this research. Include a variable list for each dataset used.

Will you address the NPEC focus topic? Yes

If yes, please briefly describe:
In the proposed study, I will examine students' perceptions of support in helping them translate postsecondary aspirations to a reality. Specifically, I am interested in how students from traditionally underrepresented populations unpack institutional requirements and apply such information to their college application and selection process. In order to make sense of such information, students often tap into diverse networks of support, and this study will explore how they supplement, reinforce, and potentially conflict with one another. Additionally, I seek to expand the existing literature in examining such support processes as a global concept, as opposed to reducing it to the result of isolated, dyadic relationships.   The proposed study has potential importance to both research and practice. Specifically, it helps to unpack the mechanisms of support that aid students in the college access process. It also aims to break down the concept of "merit" and illustrate how students who demonstrate successful outcomes (e.g. enrolling and succeeding in institutions of higher educations) have comprehensive systems of support that help to break down the complex institutional information and identify postsecondary environments that are most conducive to student success. It will also serve as a baseline of continued inquiry, as I hope to follow students through college, and examine how the college access process informs students' experience once enrolled. From an institutional perspective, such research may have an impact on both recruiting and publicity practices and establishing systems of support to aid the successful transition of students into higher educational settings.

Project Description III

Provide a timeline of key project activities:

Data collection for this project will come to a conclusion in Spring 2013. During the ensuing months, I will work on analysing the data and preparing my dissertation, with a scheduled date of defense in February 2014. This will make me eligible to graduate in May 2014. Contemporaneously, I will prepare manuscripts and presentations for dissemination.

List deliverables such as research reports, books, and presentations that will be developed from this research initiative:

The research sponsored by this fellowship will result in the completion of a dissertation, fulfilling the requirements of the Ph.D. in Community Research and Action at Vanderbilt University. Upon completion, I will break the research into scholarly articles, to be placed in journals of education, social network analysis, and community psychology. Additionally, I would like for my research to yield at least two articles for practitioners journals. I believe that the research will be of interest to both high school teachers and administrators (in assessing how best to provide youth with comprehensive support) and higher education adminstrators (in considering how best to communicate to students who have limited access to institutional information)

Describe how you will disseminate the results of this research:

In addition to the proposed publications listed above, I would like to present my findings at an array of scholarly conferences (including American Educational Research Association and the International Network for Social Network Analysis). In the local context, I will also meet with stakeholders from both of the schools included in the sample to discuss the findings and the potential importance for college access initiatives.

Provide a reference list of sources cited:

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IRB Statement

Statement of Institutional Review Board approval or exemption:

In the coming weeks, I will develop documentation for Institutional Review Board approval. This process will cover all data collection. Given that some of my participants may be younger than 18 years old, I will develop consent protocols for students over 18 as well as parental consent with corresponding youth assent forms for those who are younger than 18. In addition to securing IRB approval from Vanderbilt, I will also pursue IRB approval from school district that hosts the two target high schools. I currently have written agreement from both sites approving my proposed research.

Through previous research experiences, I am confident that my proposal will be approved by the IRB, as it poses negligible risks to participants. However, I will guarantee participating students anonymity and establish systems of data management to ensure this.

Statement of Use of Restricted Datasets

Given the scope of the proposed project, this is not applicable to my research.

Biographical Sketch

As a student at a liberal arts college, I received limited technical training in my undergraduate experience. However, I amassed a cadre of transferrable skills, including critical thinking, communication, and observation. Yet, during my junior year, I opted to participate in the Urban Education Semester in New York City. For the first time, I sought to receive the training and support to develop my aspirations to be a classroom teacher. During that time, I student taught at a charter school in Queens, NY and quickly came to realize that teaching in traditional educational settings was not my professional calling. However, my commitment to urban education was solidified. In the years that followed, I secured a number of positions in various educational settings. I worked for an afterschool program, conducted research on the effectiveness of a literacy intervention in Head Start settings, and served as a research assistant for a program that provided pre-service teacher trainings in international contexts. In the fall of 2006, I returned to school to pursue a masters degree in Risk and Prevention at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

My graduate school experience provided me with the opportunity to delve deeper into an interdisciplinary curriculum in which I focused on youth educational outcomes and the role of non-school supports in developing both skills and networks. Following my graduation in 2007, I worked at the Harlem Children's Zone, a cradle to career youth development initiative. As a member of the evaluation department, I worked with a wide variety of the initiative's 17 programs, providing rapid data analyses and technical workshops on how to interpret and apply those findings in practical settings to the staff. I worked most closely with the programs serving adolescent participants. This experience helped me focus my research interest as I applied to graduate schools and has provided me with an invaluable comparison point throughout my recent studies and research.

Since Fall 2009, I have been a student in Community Research and Action at Vanderbilt University. Throughout this time, I have built on a number of research capacities, developing my qualitative and quantitative research skills. I have pursued a rigorous methodological curriculum, including multivariable statistics, hierarchical linear modeling, structural equation modeling, social network analysis, program evaluation, and participant observation. Topically, I have focused my studies on the environmental and social experience of schooling, examining specifically how youth navigate diverse educational settings, both with and beyond the traditional school day. I have taken courses in various disciplines, including educational policy, community psychology, and sociology. Concurrently, I have had the opportunity to work with a diverse range of research projects. These include an evaluation of a community based parenting program, the development and execution of a community needs assessment, and an organizational network analysis of a youth violence prevention community collaborative initiative. Additionally, I spent six weeks in Cape Town, South Africa, conducting research on the ecological considerations of student dropout in a township high school. I have had the opportunity to present my research at a number of academic conferences, both in the United States and abroad. The combination of skills training and practical work has provided me with a unique perspective on research that informs my methods and analytical approaches.

Most recently, I have worked with the Nashville Promise Neighborhood as a Data and Evaluation Consultant. We have examined a diverse set of approaches to enhancing opportunities and supports to enhance postsecondary preparation for students who are zoned to one of Nashville's poorest performing high schools. In order to set a comprehensive strategy, we conducted a baseline analysis of obstacles and resources in the surrounding community that impact students' postsecondary aspirations and preparedness to make a successful transition. Next, we worked with multiple stakeholders, including school personnel, staff from a number of youth development organizations, and community residents, to create a multilayered approach to academic and social readiness. Ultimately, we concluded than any successful approach to change must consider and connect students' multiple settings, including their homes, schools, and surrounding communities. We are currently in the process of implementation, which include professional development for school faculty around creating a college going culture, the creation of a streamlined data-sharing system across multiple organizations, and linked supports that students can access once they matriculate in institutions of higher education.

In combination, my professional and academic pursuits have resulted in a comprehensive examination of the ecological context that informs students' postsecondary pursuits. A number of my questions focus on how students pursue higher education, and what supports are in place that help them through that process. I believe that institutions of higher education are often overlooked in how they can help facilitate access, especially for students who come from traditionally underrepresented college going populations.

Budget Requirements

Salary/Stipend: $17000.00
Tuition and fees: $500.00
Travel: $750.00
Other travel related expenses: $750.00
Other research expenses: $1000.00
Total Request: $20000.00

Funding History

Per my funding package, Vanderbilt has generously supported me through my first four years of my degree, providing tuition and insurance coverage in addition to a $14,000 9-month stipend. In Summer 2011, I was nominate for and received the Peabody Graduate Honors Scholarship in recognition of active scholarship, which supplemented my stipend with an additional $10,000 annually. In Spring 2012, I received the Bonsal Applied Education Award ($8,000) to sponsor the development and completion of dissertation research that focuses on educational solutions that have the potential to result in large-scale implementation in school or alternative educational settings. As of May 2013, all funding mechanisms will expire.

Letter of Support from Dissertation Faculty Advisor

- Letter of Support

January 9, 2013

Dear Committee Members,

I am delighted to have the opportunity to write a letter in support Bernadette Doykos for a NPEC Research and Dissertation Grant. From her first day on campus Bernadette established herself as an active scholar and researcher. Bernadette has pursued her interest in college access through several research projects and has used these opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate her dissertation work. A central part of her work has focused on the Top Floor, an comprehensive effort led by The Martha O'Bryan Center at Stratford Stem Magnet High School. The program aims to increase high school graduation rates and college access for low-income youth. Bernadette has served as a consultant and worked with program staff to develop evaluation methods and data management strategies for this out-of-school time educational enrichment program. Her responsibilities include tracking student progress, measuring knowledge gains around indicators of college and career readiness, and ongoing examinations of student satisfaction. Additionally she has employed participant observation methods to examine the ongoing development of a college-going culture in the context of the program. These activities serve as the foundation for her dissertation research.

Bernadette has demonstrated the capacity to take advantage of research opportunities that align with her research agenda. Bernadette has established herself as a productive researcher with a bright future ahead of her. Given her track record thus far, I believe she is deserving of and would benefit from this award. I would be happy to provide any additional information. Thank you for your consideration of Bernadette.

Sincerely,

Kimberly D. Bess
Assistant Professor
Human and Organizational Development

Kimberly.d.bess@vanderbilt.edu