

Free application campaigns as policy interventions: A case study of Kansas Free Application
Days

by

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B.S., University of Phoenix, 2010
M.S., Fort Hays State University, 2014

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Access to postsecondary education remains unevenly distributed across socioeconomic, geographic, and demographic lines, with financial and procedural barriers continuing to constrain college going opportunities for low-income, first generation, rural, and underrepresented students. Among these barriers, college application fees represent a critical but understudied point of friction in the transition from high school to higher education. In response, states have increasingly adopted free college application campaigns; however, limited empirical evidence exists regarding whether such initiatives expand access or simply redistribute applications among institutions. In addition, little research has examined how school level implementation and counselor support shape the reach and equity of these initiatives across different local contexts.

This policy analysis case study examined the Kansas Free Application Days initiative, a statewide, centrally coordinated fee-waiver campaign that allowed students to apply to all public and participating private institutions without cost during a designated three-day window. Guided by Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model of college choice and Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, the study investigated how free application days influence students' decisions to apply to college and how school counselor practices shape policy implementation and student participation.

Data sources included a questionnaire administered to Kansas high school seniors and structured interviews with school counselors across rural, suburban, and urban contexts. Student questionnaire responses were analyzed descriptively to identify patterns in application behavior and motivation, while counselor interviews were analyzed thematically to examine implementation practices, local capacity, and equity considerations. Findings from these sources

were integrated to evaluate the policy's design, delivery, and outcomes across diverse school settings.

Results suggest that Kansas Free Application Days reduced perceived financial risk and encouraged broader application behavior for many students, including institutions students initially perceived as out of reach. The initiative also helped normalize the college application process within schools by creating structured opportunities for students to apply alongside peers and seek guidance from counselors. The designated three day application window further created a clear and time bound signal that this was the moment to apply, generating a sense of urgency that prompted students to take action. Although counseling staff expressed strong support for Kansas Free Application Days, the initiative's impact varied based on how it was embedded within existing school structures including scheduling, counselor capacity, and availability of direct application support for students. These findings indicate that fee elimination alone is insufficient to ensure uniform access and underscore the importance of aligning financial interventions with school-level supports to meaningfully expand postsecondary opportunity.

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Dedication

First, to God. Thank You for giving me the strength, guidance, and courage to complete this journey. I know I could not have done this without You.

To my husband, Dustin Knox, and our children, Kiara, Kameron, Hudsyn, and Gwyneth. Your love, patience, and encouragement made this accomplishment possible. You walked beside me through challenges, high stress seasons, and setbacks, always reminding me to keep moving forward. You are my reason for pushing ahead. May you always remember that education is something no one can ever take away from you. A test score does not define your worth, your intelligence, or your potential. Never limit yourselves. Dream boldly, chase your goals relentlessly, and choose paths that fulfill you. Together, you are my why.

This dissertation is also dedicated to every first generation student, rural learner, and underserved individual who faces odds stacked against them. You belong. Believe in yourself even when you feel uncertain. Surround yourself with people you aspire to be like, even when it feels uncomfortable. Let growth opportunities stretch you. When challenges arise, see them as lessons that build resilience. Find mentors, network, and put yourself out there. Some of my greatest supports came from professors and higher education professionals who opened doors I never imagined for myself and reminded me that I belonged in spaces I once thought were only a dream.

As a first generation, fully Pell eligible undergraduate raised amid financial hardship and significant childhood trauma, I know what it means to feel unworthy and uncertain about the future yet determined to want better for my family. I was admitted to my undergraduate program on conditional acceptance after not meeting minimum admission requirements, filled with

uncertainty about whether I belonged. But I stumbled, I learned, and I kept going. My past did not dictate my future and neither does yours. Turn your mess into a message.

When it gets hard, remember your people. Remember your why. Let the factors stacked against you become your motivation. You are not a statistic. You are proof that belief can move mountains and build bridges. Be the outlier. Make a difference. Through it all keep believing.

Chapter 1 - Overview

Introduction

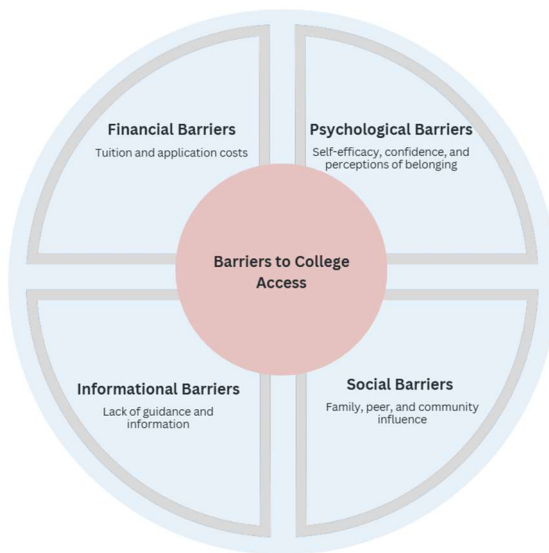
Access to postsecondary education is widely regarded as a cornerstone of economic mobility, personal advancement, and national prosperity (Ma & Pender, 2023). In the United States, higher levels of educational attainment are consistently associated with increased earnings, improved health outcomes, and greater workforce participation (Ma & Pender, 2023). Yet, for many students in the United States, particularly those from low-income, first generation, rural, and underrepresented backgrounds, the journey from high school to college is marked by systemic barriers that limit opportunity (Engberg & Allen, 2011; Perna, 2006). These barriers are both financial and procedural, and they manifest in ways that make college less attainable for students already facing disadvantages (Adelman, 2006; McDonough, 1997). From application fees and complex admissions processes to limited advising support and misperceptions about affordability, the hurdles to higher education remain persistent and unevenly distributed (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006; Hoxby & Turner, 2015; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Roderick et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2014).

The barriers to higher education can be understood as four intersecting forces that shape college access as shown in Figure 1.1. Financial barriers include direct costs of applications and tuition (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006; Pallais, 2015). Psychological barriers involve self-efficacy, confidence, and perceptions of belonging (Bandura, 1986; Gibbons & Borders, 2010). Informational barriers reflect limited access to knowledge about the application and enrollment process (Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Perna, 2006). Social barriers encompass peer, family, and community influences (Bryan et al., 2011; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010). Together, these forces disproportionately restrict college access for students from low-income, first-generation, rural,

and underrepresented backgrounds, who are more likely to experience multiple barriers simultaneously and have fewer resources to navigate them.

Figure 1.1

Intersecting Barriers to College Access



While each of these factors plays an important role, this study placed a magnifying glass on the financial element of college access, recognizing that even modest up-front costs can deter students from applying to college (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006; Hoxby & Turner, 2013). These initial costs introduce a critical point of friction in the college going pipeline, influencing who proceeds beyond interest and intention to actual application behavior. Application fees create a critical point of friction in the college going pipeline. Abourezk-Pinkstone (2024) found that in 2019 undergraduate application fees at four-year public and private non-profit colleges ranged from \$0 to \$300, with the most common fee at \$50 and an average of \$40. Fees at highly selective institutions were even higher, averaging \$70 to \$100 (Abourezk-Pinkstone, 2024).

From a social cognitive theory perspective, financial obstacles can reduce students' perceived self-efficacy, shaping beliefs about whether higher education is attainable (Bandura, 1986).

To address these concerns, states and institutions have implemented a range of interventions, including targeted outreach and advising initiatives, mentorship programs, FAFSA completion campaigns, and application fee waivers (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006; Hoxby & Turner, 2013). Among the most visible and growing of these efforts are free college application campaigns which encompass statewide or institutional initiatives that eliminate application fees during specific windows of time (Abourezk-Pinkstone, 2024; Kansas Board of Regents [KBOR], 2025; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). Research shows such campaigns are unique in that they simultaneously reduce a direct cost, provide a visible signal of institutional openness, and concentrate attention on the application process in a way that can mobilize schools, counselors, and families (Castleman & Page, 2015; Dunlop Velez, 2020; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016).

Two related initiatives shape the Kansas context and provide essential background for understanding this study. The American College Application Campaign (ACAC) is a national effort that partners with states to increase the number of underrepresented students who apply to college by hosting school-based events and offering structured support during the application process (ACT, 2025). Since 2015, Kansas has participated in ACAC through its statewide campaign called Apply Kansas, administered by KBOR (KBOR, 2025). Apply Kansas coordinates with high school site coordinators to offer application events each fall and collects school-level data on student application submissions.

In 2023, Kansas launched the Kansas Free Application Days. This statewide fee-waiver campaign allows students to submit applications to all public institutions and participating private colleges, without paying application fees during a designated three-day window (KBOR,

2025). The initiative represents Kansas's most comprehensive effort to date to remove cost barriers and expand equitable access to postsecondary education. Together, Apply Kansas and Kansas Free Application Days represent a collective, statewide approach: one focuses on school-based support for students, and the other removes the financial barrier that often prevents students from applying (ACT, 2025).

Kansas is one of only two states in the United States that operate a three day free college application initiative. Although 23 states offer application fee incentives, these efforts typically extend over longer periods, ranging from one week to a full year, making Kansas's concentrated three day model relatively uncommon (KBOR, 2025). Thus, Kansas offers a particularly important case for examining these efforts. The state has a distinct rural profile, with 46.3% of its schools classified as rural compared to 29.3% nationally (Showalter et al., 2023), and nearly half of Kansas public-school students identified as economically (Kansas State Department of Education [KSDE], 2025). Kansas therefore stands at the crossroads of rural America, functioning both as a mirror of the challenges rural states face and as a magnifying glass through which the impact of fee-waiver policies can be critically studied. Its blend of rural remoteness, economic diversity, and centralized governance creates conditions that magnify both the promise and challenge of expanding access. What can be learned in Kansas has implications that extend far beyond state lines.

However, emerging research reveals that the removal of cost barriers alone does not uniformly translate into increased application rates across diverse student populations (Abourezk-Pinkstone, 2024; Hoxby & Turner, 2015; Smith, 2014). Instead, students' responses to these campaigns are mediated by a complex interaction of financial, informational, psychological, and social factors that amplify or constrain them (Castleman & Page, 2014; Page

& Scott-Clayton, 2016; Roderick, et al., 2011). Thus, the problem is twofold: (a) whether fee-waiver campaigns genuinely expand access or merely redistribute applications across institutions, and (b) how local school- and counselor-level implementation conditions influence their reach and impact.

In this study, Kansas Free Application Days was treated as a policy instrument whose outcomes depend not only on fee elimination but also on school-level delivery and student perceptions. The initiative provides an opportunity to examine whether a low cost, high visibility financial intervention can meaningfully influence application behavior within the college going pipeline in a predominantly rural state. This study positions Kansas Free Application Days as an intervention whose impacts are contingent upon implementation context, institutional coordination, and student level interpretation. Kansas therefore serves as an instrumental case through which broader questions about policy design, access, and equity in postsecondary education can be explored (Stake, 1995).

Policy Framing of Kansas

This study treats Kansas not only as a case to study but as a policy environment in which a state level intervention is designed, coordinated, implemented, and experienced across diverse local contexts. Building on its involvement with the ACAC, KBOR launched the Kansas Free Application Days pilot in November 2023 and continued the pilot in October 2024 and 2025. This three-day statewide pilot initiative waives undergraduate application fees for all Kansas public institutions and participating private institutions for Kansas residents. The dates for these three days are formally determined and approved by the nine-member KBOR Board during the previous academic year in the spring, several months before the fall campaign. Once approved, the dates are announced through a statewide press release, distributed by email to staff at public

and private institutions, and publicized through KSDE and KBOR managed listservs reaching high school staff across Kansas (KBOR, 2025). Since the beginning of the initiative, all Kansas Independent College Association private institutions have agreed to participate (KBOR, 2025). With participation from all public and private higher education institutions across the state, the initiative represents a collective, coordinated effort to expand college access. While the ACAC broadly encourages application completion (ACT, 2025), Kansas's three-day initiative adds a universal fee waiver component, increasing its potential to shape student behavior and postsecondary outcomes, particularly for those who identify application costs as a significant obstacle (Hout, 2012; Pallais, 2015).

In addition to the three-day universal waiver period, Kansas also provides a year-round need-based option through the Apply Kansas Application Fee Waiver Form administered by the KBOR. This form allows students who meet financial indicators—such as eligibility for free or reduced lunch, federal or state assistance programs, or other documented indicators of economic need—to apply to any Kansas public institution without paying an application fee year-around. Several institutions have integrated the fee waiver question directly into their online application platforms, eliminating the need for a separate paper submission. Each institution retains discretion to accept or decline submitted waivers, and if a waiver is declined, the student is asked to pay the application fee. A similar national mechanism exists through the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) Application Fee Waiver, which enables students with limited financial resources to apply to colleges at no cost. For both the KBOR Apply Kansas Application Fee Waiver and NACAC waiver processes, an authorized official—such as a school counselor, postsecondary support staff member, principal, or representative from a community-based organization—must verify the student's eligibility by completing the

designated certification section. While these waiver mechanisms provide important year-round cost relief, they require students and families to have knowledge of their availability and access to an authorized adult who can verify eligibility. As a result, students who lack college going knowledge or consistent advising support might not utilize these opportunities even when they qualify. Together, these state and national waivers ensure that cost is not a year-round barrier for qualified students, while the Kansas Free Application Days initiative extends this principle universally by removing financial and procedural obstacles for all students during a concentrated statewide campaign.

The three-day universal fee waiver initiative along with the Apply Kansas campaign is intended to reduce both financial and procedural barriers to college entry, particularly for Kansas underserved populations, where access to advising and exposure to postsecondary pathways may be limited (KBOR, 2025). The free application fee campaigns often serve as catalysts for school-wide events, counselor-led advising sessions, and increased college going visibility (Dunlop Velez, 2020). In Kansas, the student support provided during this three-day window varies widely across high schools. Some districts organize structured, counselor-led application support, while others lack the capacity to offer guidance during these initiatives (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Perna et al., 2008). School counselors, who are often the primary postsecondary planning resource for students, play a critical role in shaping how students experience the campaign by raising awareness, providing individualized support, and guiding them through the application process (Bryan et al., 2011; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014, Perna et al., 2008). For a student, the degree of counselor involvement can significantly influence whether the campaign is understood as a genuine opportunity to access higher education or merely as another procedural task. Yet counselors' perspectives and the strategies they employ are underrepresented in the

research on free college application initiatives, leaving important questions about their broader impact on student decision-making in Kansas (Bryan et al., 2011; Dunlop Velez, 2020; Perna et al., 2008). Accordingly, implementation is analyzed as a policy delivery challenge that depends on local capacity, counselor role definition, and school culture.

Furthermore, while early evidence from other states suggests that free application campaigns can increase the number of application submissions, the broader impact of these initiatives remains unclear (Abourezk-Pinkstone, 2024; Clayton & Umbach, 2020). Specifically, it is not yet clear whether these campaigns simply prompt students who were already planning to apply to submit applications to multiple institutions, or whether they genuinely expand the number of students planning to attend college, particularly those who might not have applied otherwise (Abourezk-Pinkstone, 2024; Becker, 2018; Castleman & Page, 2015; Hoxby & Avery, 2013). Although institutional records can show how many applications were submitted during these windows, such data will not capture the decision-making process behind those numbers. Understanding whether students actually applied because of the removal of fees, or if they would have applied regardless, is critical for evaluating the true effectiveness of this Kansas pilot initiative. This raises critical questions about whether such policies promote true access or simply redistribute applicants across institutions. Given that Kansas's effort represents a relatively new statewide initiative, research that examines the student perspective offers a timely and significant contribution to the broader conversation about how fee-waiver campaigns influence college access and choice. This study therefore treats Kansas Free Application Days as a policy to be evaluated that may either increase access or reallocate applications within the system, and it interrogates the mechanisms that produce either result.

School-level variation in staffing, resources, and college going culture can significantly influence how effectively the initiative is delivered. Kansas presents a valuable case study as one of the two states offering a three-day, statewide fee-waiver initiative. Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE) provides the only parallel example through its Colorado Free Application Days, a three-day campaign during which all 32 public colleges and universities and several private institutions waive undergraduate application fees for Colorado residents. In 2025, this occurred from October 7–9, capping off Colorado Applies Month which is similar to Apply Kansas (CDHE, n.d.). Beyond increasing visibility and participation, these initiatives also help align K–12 systems with postsecondary institutions, fostering more cohesive pipelines from high school to college. This alignment helps institutionalize college going cultures (Perna, 2006), which is especially important in schools with historically low postsecondary enrollment rates where systemic support and exposure to college planning may be limited (Engberg & Wolniak, 2014). In Kansas, the pilot started in 2023, making it a relatively new statewide policy whose outcomes and influence have yet to be fully understood. As a predominantly rural state with wide variation in counselor-to-student ratios, institutional proximity, and college going traditions, Kansas provides a distinct setting to examine whether fee-waiver policies simply increase applications numerically or meaningfully alter students’ postsecondary decision-making. The comparative lens is used instrumentally to clarify which observed outcomes are attributable to the Kansas policy design and governance context rather than to generic fee waivers. This research takes up that question by centering the perspectives of Kansas students and school counselors to better understand the role of Free Application Days in shaping college access. In Kansas, the story of access is not only about barriers but also about possibility. The Free Application Days campaign illuminates how a single, coordinated policy can bring together

families, schools, counselors, and institutions in pursuit of a common goal: to remind every student that higher education is within reach. With its deep rural roots and willingness to innovate, Kansas is uniquely poised to demonstrate how low-cost, high-visibility interventions can reshape the college going pipeline.

In summary, the literature highlights unresolved gaps regarding the true impact of free college application campaigns, particularly whether these initiatives expand access for underserved students or merely redistribute applicants among institutions. This study responds to these gaps in the literature by analyzing the Kansas Free Application Days campaign as a case study in policy analysis, situating the initiative within broader state-level efforts to reduce barriers to postsecondary access and evaluating its implementation, design, and implications for equity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). By combining a questionnaire from high school seniors with interviews from school counseling staff, the research explores whether the campaign influences students' decisions to apply to college, and how school counselor practices shape student participation. Understanding the degree to which these campaigns broaden access or simply shift student preferences is critical for policymakers, educators, and institutions seeking to design equitable and effective college access interventions. Despite the growing popularity of universal fee waiver initiatives across states, questions remain about whether these campaigns expand access or merely shift application behavior, and how school-level implementation affects their reach and equity (Hoxby & Turner, 2015; Smith, 2014). These unresolved issues shape the foundation for this study.

Kansas Higher Education System Context

KBOR is the governing and coordinating body for public higher education in Kansas. Appointed by the Governor, the nine-member Board governs six state universities, coordinates

one municipal university, and oversees the coordination of nineteen community colleges and six technical colleges (KBOR, n.d.). KBOR is responsible for developing statewide higher education policy, approving new academic programs, allocating state funding, managing data systems, and aligning educational opportunities with workforce needs (KBOR, n.d.). As such, the Board plays a pivotal role in shaping the landscape of postsecondary access and success across the state.

The Kansas Free Application Days campaign, as well as the Apply Kansas initiative, are administered under the direction of KBOR. By centralizing these efforts through a statewide coordinating body, Kansas is able to streamline outreach, simplify messaging for students and families, and ensure consistent participation among institutions (KBOR, 2020). As the primary driver of public higher education policy in the state, KBOR's leadership ensures that initiatives like Kansas Free Application Days are grounded in a broader strategy to increase educational attainment and reduce access barriers for all students. In this study, KBOR's role is analyzed as the core governance mechanism that links policy design to delivery. The Board's coordinating authority functions as the enabling condition for a uniform fee waiver, common communications, and shared data infrastructure, which together shape both the reach and fidelity of implementation across Kansas.

Problem Statement

Free College Application Campaigns are designed to reduce financial and procedural barriers to college access, yet their effectiveness in influencing postsecondary behavior remains underexplored (Abourezk-Pinkstone, 2024; Becker, 2018; Hoxby & Turner, 2015). While research shows that removing application fees can increase application submission rates (Abourezk-Pinkstone, 2024; Pallais, 2015; Smith et al., 2014), it is unclear whether such

initiatives actually increase the number of students pursuing higher education or merely shift where students apply (Castleman & Page, 2014; Hoxby & Avery, 2013).

The Kansas Free Application Days, a statewide initiative that eliminates application fees across public and participating private institutions, offers a compelling context to investigate these questions. Do these campaigns attract students who would not have otherwise applied to college, or do they simply incentivize students to apply to different institutions? In addition, the role and influence of school counselors, who are key individuals in facilitating campaign participation, is not well understood in the current literature. This study addresses these gaps by examining both student behavior and counselor perspectives to assess the reach, implementation, and outcomes of Kansas Free Application Days. Framed as a policy analysis, the core problem is to determine whether Kansas's centrally coordinated fee waiver operates as an access expanding intervention or as a redistribution mechanism within an existing applicant pool, and to explain how governance, school capacity, and counselor practice condition these effects.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this policy analysis case study (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018) is to evaluate the Kansas Free Application Days initiative as a state-level policy intervention designed to expand access to higher education. Specifically, the study investigates whether the campaign reduces financial and procedural barriers in ways that meaningfully increase the number of students applying to college or whether it primarily redistributes applications among institutions. In addition, the study examines how school-level implementation, particularly the role of counselors in mobilizing advising and support, shapes the policy's reach and equity effects across diverse contexts.

By situating Kansas Free Application Days within the broader policy environment of KBOR, the study analyzes both the policy's design and its delivery, attending to how governance structures, institutional coordination, and school capacity condition its impact. Through a questionnaire of Kansas high school seniors and interviews with school counselors across rural, suburban, and urban settings, the research generates policy-relevant evidence about how a statewide, universal fee waiver functions in practice. Grounded in Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice framework and Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory (SCT), the analysis interrogates both the intended and unintended consequences of this policy instrument and provides insights to inform future statewide college access initiatives.

Research Questions

The overarching research question guiding this study is:

How do Free Application Campaigns influence students' decisions to apply to college?

To address this overarching question, the following sub-questions will be explored:

Sub-RQ1. What factors influence students' decisions to participate in the Kansas Free Application Days?

Sub-RQ2. How do school counselors' approaches to Free Application Days inform recommendations for college access policies and practices?

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is guided by two complementary theoretical models: Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model of college choice and Bandura's (1986) SCT. Together, these frameworks move beyond purely economic explanations of student choice and emphasize both the structural stages of the college going process and the psychological mechanisms that influence action. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model conceptualizes the

process of choosing a college as unfolding over three phases: predisposition, search, and choice. This model emphasizes how students develop college going aspirations, seek information, and ultimately decide where to apply and enroll. It is especially useful for exploring how school-based supports, like counselor interventions and application events, interact with students' evolving readiness and decision-making.

Bandura's (1986) SCT highlights the reciprocal interaction of personal factors, behaviors, and environmental influences in shaping human action. Applied to this study, SCT emphasizes how self-efficacy, observational learning, and perceived support systems influence whether students take advantage of Free Application Days. For example, students' confidence in their ability to complete an application (self-efficacy) and the presence of counselor or peer modeling may directly affect their likelihood of participating. This framework is particularly useful in examining how counselor engagement and school contexts act as environmental supports that shape student motivation and follow-through.

Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing the behavioral, psychological, and structural factors that shape students' responses to the Kansas Free Application Days campaign. The three-phase model clarifies how aspirations and decision-making evolve across time, while SCT illuminates how motivation, self-efficacy, and environmental supports influence whether students act on the opportunity. Using both models in tandem strengthens the case study, ensuring alignment between research questions, data sources, and analytic approaches while capturing both structural and psychological factors in students' college application decisions. As summarized in Table 1.1, the study's research questions, data sources, and theoretical frameworks are intentionally aligned to examine both student decision-

making and school-level implementation conditions, providing the conceptual foundation for the research questions that follow.

Table 1.1

Alignment of Research Questions with Data Sources and Theoretical Frameworks

Theoretical Framework	Research Question	Student Questionnaire	Counseling Staff Interview Questions
Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model & Bandura's (1986) SCT	How do Free Application Campaigns influence students' decisions to apply to college?	Q1, Q2, Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10, Q11, Q12, Q13, Q14, Q16, Q17	Q8, Q9, Q10, Q11, Q13, Q17, Q19, Q22
Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model & Bandura's (1986) SCT	Sub-RQ1: What factors influence students' decisions to participate in the Kansas Free Application Days?	Q1, Q2, Q5, Q6, Q9, Q10, Q11, Q12, Q13, Q14, Q15, Q16, Q17	Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10, Q11, Q12, Q13, Q14
Bandura's (1986) SCT	Sub-RQ2: How do school counselors' approaches to Free Application Days inform recommendations for college access policies and practices?		Q5, Q6, Q15, Q16, Q18, Q20, Q21, Q22

Methodology

This study employs a policy analysis case study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018) to evaluate Kansas Free Application Days as a statewide policy intervention. The case is bounded by a specific state policy, a defined three-day implementation window, and a coordinated governance structure under KBOR. Student and counselor data are treated as complementary strands of evidence that inform both the effectiveness and equity implications of the initiative. Data was collected in parallel, analyzed using methods appropriate to each strand, and then interpreted collectively to provide a comprehensive account of how the initiative

functions across contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Fetters et al., 2013). This structure supports the dual aim of the study: to assess whether fee waivers reduce barriers and alter student application behavior, and to evaluate how implementation practices condition policy delivery at the school level (Johnson & Howley, 2015; Perna & Finney, 2014).

The instrumental case study approach is well-suited for examining real-world policy interventions in context, as it allows for in-depth exploration of implementation across diverse environments (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Policy analysis traditions in education emphasize intended outcomes, implementation, fidelity, and equity, including potential unintended consequences that arise when policies meet local conditions (Johnson & Howley, 2015; Perna & Finney, 2014; Perna & Thomas, 2009). Because statewide initiatives unfold differently depending on school resources, demographics, and counselor capacity, a case study approach provides a rigorous way to capture how Kansas Free Application Days are interpreted and enacted at the local level. In this study, the case is not the individual schools or students, but rather the policy itself as implemented across multiple contexts. This framing positions student and counselor perspectives as evidence for assessing policy design, fidelity, and outcomes.

To capture contextual variation, the study employed a two-stage sampling strategy. First, sites were selected using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) locale codes and socioeconomic indicators to ensure representation of urban, suburban, and rural settings (Blackstone, 2018). NCES classifications provide a nationally recognized framework for distinguishing school contexts and are widely used in equity-focused education research (Johnson & Howley, 2015; Showalter et al., 2023). Their adoption here ensures transparency and replicability in site selection while highlighting equity concerns in a state where 46.3% of schools are rural, compared to 29.3% nationally (Showalter et al., 2023). This makes Kansas a

particularly valuable case for analyzing policy delivery in communities where resources and advising supports are often limited. Second, within these sites, two forms of data were collected: (a) a questionnaire administered to high school seniors to capture their application behaviors and perceptions, and (b) structured interviews with school counselors to document implementation practices. Collecting both strands within the same sites enables direct comparison between student-reported experiences and counselor perspectives, strengthening the evaluation of how policy intent translates into practice. This paired evidence strategy strengthens credibility through methodological coherence and clear alignment between research questions, data sources, and claims (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Tracy, 2010).

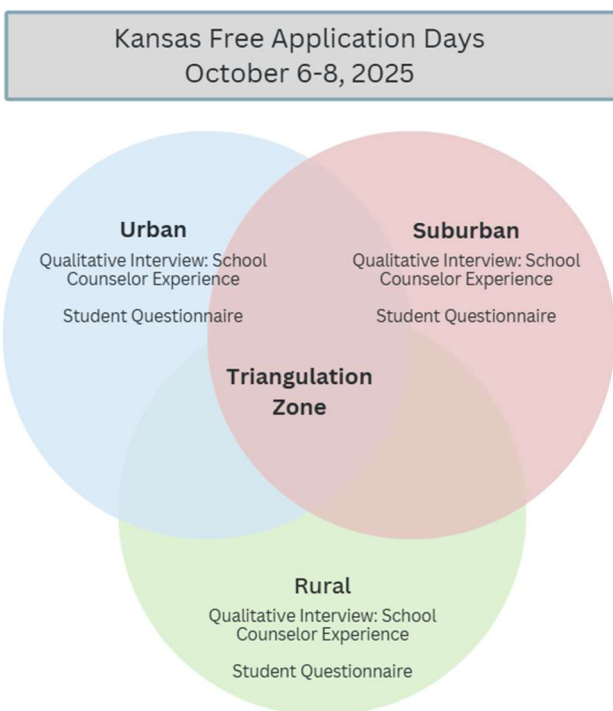
Descriptive data from student questionnaires were analyzed statistically to identify patterns in application behavior, with interpretation guided by Bandura's SCT (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Pajares, 1996). Qualitative data from counselor interviews were analyzed thematically, using Hossler and Gallagher's three phase model of college choice to structure interpretations of how counselor led supports shape student predisposition, search, and choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Roderick et al., 2011). SCT highlights the role of self-efficacy, observational learning, and environmental supports in shaping whether students act on the opportunity to apply, while the three-phase model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) emphasizes how aspirations, information, and readiness develop across stages of the college going process. Findings from both strands were then integrated during interpretation to provide a holistic account of how students and counselors experience the initiative.

By employing a policy analysis case study, the study attends to psychological, behavioral, structural, and institutional factors while keeping equity at the center of interpretation (Johnson & Howley, 2015; Perna, 2006; Yosso, 2005). Together, these approaches generate a

policy-relevant evaluation of whether Kansas Free Application Days expands college access equitably or redistributes applications within the existing system (Abourezk Pinkstone, 2024; Page & Scott Clayton, 2016). Figure 1.2 provides a visual overview of the policy analysis case study design, illustrating how the Kansas Free Application Days initiative is examined through aligned research questions, data sources, and theoretical frameworks.

Figure 1.2

Visual Representation of the Case Study Design



Definition of Terms

Apply Kansas: A statewide college application completion initiative administered by KBOR as part of ACAC. The program supports high schools in organizing in-school events where students receive assistance from counselors and volunteers in completing and submitting college applications.

College Access: The conditions and supports that enable students to pursue and engage in postsecondary education, encompassing financial, informational, procedural, and social dimensions (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006).

College Going: The process by which students progress from forming aspirations about attending college to actively engaging in behaviors that lead to enrollment in postsecondary education. In Kansas, this is captured by the percentage of Kansas high school students entering public, private, and out of state colleges (KBOR. 2025).

College Knowledge: College knowledge refers to the practical, procedural, and cultural understanding students need to successfully navigate the postsecondary application and enrollment process. It includes awareness of admissions requirements, financial aid systems, testing expectations, and institutional differences, and is often unequally distributed based on students' social capital and family background (Conley, 2005; McDonough, 1997; Roderick et al., 2011).

First Generation Students: First generation students are those whose parents or guardians have not earned a four-year college degree.

Kansas Free Application Days: A statewide campaign that allows high school seniors and adult learners to apply to Kansas public colleges and participating private institutions without paying application fees during designated days.

Rural: Schools located in remote or distant areas, often characterized by low population density and limited access to services and institutions. According to NCES (2024), rural designations include fringe, distant, and remote locales, typically reflecting schools far from urbanized areas or large towns.

Suburban: Schools that are situated on the outskirts of urban centers. In Kansas, suburban districts often lie within commuting distance of metropolitan areas and are marked by a mix of residential and semi-rural characteristics. These schools may experience both the resources of proximity to cities and the challenges of serving transitioning or sprawling communities.

Summer Melt: The phenomenon where high school graduates who have been accepted to college and intend to enroll fail to matriculate in the fall following graduation. This is often attributed to factors such as missed deadlines, incomplete paperwork, financial barriers, and a lack of post-graduation advising or support.

Underrepresented Students: This term refers to students who have historically been excluded or marginalized in postsecondary education due to systemic inequities tied to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geographic location, language background, or disability. This includes students of color, first generation college students, low-income students, English language learners, and those from rural or under-resourced schools.

Underserved Populations: Underserved populations refer to students who lack adequate access to resources, support systems, and opportunities that facilitate preparation for and enrollment in higher education. These students may attend under-resourced schools; live in geographically isolated areas; or experience limited access to college counseling, financial aid information, or rigorous academic coursework. The term emphasizes

inequities in the quality or availability of services that support postsecondary readiness and success.

Urban: Schools that are located within principal cities and are typically characterized by high population density and diverse student populations. They often serve communities with varying levels of socioeconomic advantage and face complex challenges related to funding, overcrowding, and equitable resource distribution.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter reviews research on college access, organized to move from broad considerations of higher education's societal role to more specific barriers, interventions, and the context for this study. Postsecondary education has long been recognized as a public good, yielding both private and collective benefits through economic mobility, civic engagement, and workforce development (Baum et al., 2014; Hout, 2012; Ma & Pender, 2023; Perna, 2006). Yet access to these opportunities is uneven, shaped by intersecting financial, informational, geographic, and social conditions that advantage some groups while constraining others (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).

Research consistently demonstrates that college going reflects the interplay of forces operating at multiple levels such as individual, familial, school-based, and structural (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). Students' perceptions of affordability, readiness, and return on investment interact with their access to advising, peer networks, and institutional resources to shape the pathway from aspiration to enrollment (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). Even academically prepared students may face procedural or financial hurdles that limit their options or derail their plans (Avery & Kane, 2004; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). These dynamics underscore why both the barriers and the interventions designed to mitigate them must be considered together.

Within this broader context, targeted initiatives have emerged to reduce inequities in access. Financial supports such as fee waivers, federal aid, and simplified application procedures aim to offset cost and complexity, while advising interventions expand college knowledge and decision-making support (Castleman & Page, 2014; Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Perna & Kurban, 2013). Evidence shows that similar interventions can increase application and enrollment rates,

particularly for underserved students, though effects often depend on design, delivery, and the school context in which they are implemented (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Roderick et al., 2011).

The Kansas Free Application Days campaign provides a particularly revealing case for study. States with large rural populations face compounded challenges: geographic isolation, limited postsecondary exposure, and stretched advising capacity (Byun et al., 2012; Hillman, 2016; Showalter et al., 2023). Kansas' 2023 initiative created a universal fee-waiver opportunity across all public institutions and participating private institutions (KBOR, 2025). Because this is a new campaign, no formal guidance on participation or implementation has been provided to high schools, and KBOR does not have oversight of high school implementation. As a result, each school retains autonomy in how it engages with the three designated days, leading to variation in practice depending on local context, staffing, and advising structures. Unlike institution-specific or national randomized programs, this coordinated statewide effort provides a unique opportunity to examine whether eliminating application fees expands overall access or merely redistributes applications among institutions. It also highlights the role of school counselors as central implementers of the campaign, whose advising practices and constraints significantly shape how such initiatives translate into student outcomes (Bryan et al., 2011; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014).

Guided by Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model of college choice and Bandura's (1986) SCT, this study examines how Kansas Free Application Days impact student application behavior and counselor practice. The literature review that follows first considers postsecondary education as a public good, then explores the broader forces shaping access, followed by research on student decision-making processes, college readiness, and college

knowledge. It examines how social, familial, and school-based supports influence opportunity and then turns to the barriers and interventions documented in the literature, including application fees, financial and procedural challenges, and geographic disparities. The review concludes with scholarship on the role of counselors and school-based campaigns, leading into statewide initiatives such as Kansas Free Application Days. Collectively, this review establishes the foundation for a policy analysis case study examining whether Kansas' campaign expands opportunity, shifts enrollment patterns, and promotes equity across diverse school contexts.

Postsecondary Education as a Public Good

Postsecondary education has long been recognized not only as a private investment in individual advancement but also as a public good that produces broad societal benefits. Economists, sociologists, and policymakers argue that higher education contributes to collective prosperity by enhancing workforce productivity, fostering civic participation, reducing dependence on social services, and supporting democratic engagement (Baum et al., 2014; Bowen, 1977; McMahon, 2009). The public good framing emphasizes that the benefits of an educated populace extend beyond the individual degree holder to the community and nation, including reduced unemployment, improved health outcomes, stronger tax bases, and greater civic cohesion (Ma & Pender, 2023; Perna, 2006).

From an economic standpoint, higher education contributes to human capital development by equipping individuals with skills and knowledge that enhance innovation and productivity (Barrow and Malamud, 2015). Carnevale et al. (2016) estimate that over 95% of jobs created since 2010 have gone to workers with at least some postsecondary education, underscoring higher education's role in economic competitiveness. At the societal level, McMahon (2009) finds that public returns including higher civic participation, increased

volunteerism, and reduced crime account for a significant share of higher education's total value. These externalities justify state and federal investments in college affordability programs, need-based aid, and initiatives like application fee waivers, which attempt to broaden access to these shared benefits.

Contemporary research affirms that individuals with college degrees are more likely to vote, volunteer, and engage in community activities (Hout, 2012; Perna & Finney, 2014). These civic dividends represent forms of non-market value that reinforce higher education's designation as a public good, even as market-oriented policies often prioritize individual returns. However, framing postsecondary education as a public good also sharpens the tension around unequal access (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Perna, 2006). Bailey and Dynarski (2011) demonstrate that income-based gaps in college entry and completion widened substantially between the early 1980s and early 2000s, with students from high-income families increasingly more likely to both enroll in and complete college than their low-income peers. These patterns highlight how access to the benefits of higher education has become more stratified along socioeconomic lines, raising concerns about equity in the distribution of this public good. Carnevale and Strohl (2013) further show that inequitable access to rigorous coursework, advising, and selective institutions channels disadvantaged students toward lower-resourced colleges with fewer completion supports, thereby limiting the full public benefit of higher education.

The conceptualization of higher education as a public good, therefore, reinforces the urgency of interventions that reduce barriers to access. Programs that waive application fees, simplify financial aid, or expand advising capacity are not only about individual opportunity but also about sustaining the collective benefits of an educated populace. Labaree (1997) notes the

competing logics of education, public good versus private good, often shape policy design. When initiatives like Kansas Free Application Days lower financial barriers, they act on the public good rationale by seeking to broaden participation and, by extension, the collective social and economic returns of postsecondary education.

Perceived Cost and Return on Investment

In addition to challenges related to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion, students often struggle to accurately weigh the perceived return on investment of a college education. While postsecondary credentials generally offer long-term economic advantages, concerns about upfront costs, student loan debt, and uncertain future earnings frequently cause hesitation among prospective students, particularly low-income and first generation students (Baum & Schwartz, 2015; Hillman, 2016). Barrow and Malamud (2015) studied low-income, first generation high school students across several U.S. districts and highlighted their limited access to reliable financial guidance, which complicates their ability to evaluate these tradeoffs effectively. Their research concluded that although college is a worthwhile investment on average, it offers particularly significant benefits for many subgroups, including minority and economically disadvantaged students (Barrow & Malamud; 2015).

Building on earlier findings by Perna (2006) regarding the constrained college search process, subsequent research has shown that students' perceptions of affordability are shaped not only by actual costs but also by incomplete or inaccurate information. This issue is particularly acute in under-resourced urban and rural schools where counseling and financial literacy supports are limited (Perna & Titus, 2005). As a result, subjective affordability perceptions strongly influence whether students choose to apply to college. Roderick et al. (2009) found that strong academic qualifications alone are often not enough for students to successfully navigate

the college application process, particularly for students in the under-resourced Chicago Public Schools (CPS). Their mixed-methods study focused on academically advanced students, including many first generation and low-income students, from selective enrollment high schools and Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) programs. The study revealed that even minor, seemingly routine expenses such as application fees, standardized testing fees, transcript request charges, and transportation costs, accumulate and present significant barriers. These costs frequently interfere with students' ability to apply to a range of colleges, including those that best match their qualifications. More than one-third of academically advanced CPS students enrolled in non-selective or two-year colleges, or did not enroll at all, despite being qualified for selective institutions (Roderick et al., 2009). Roderick et al. (2009) emphasized that without specialized support and financial guidance, students often default to local colleges or forgo applying to institutions with higher costs, more complex applications, or perceived financial risk. This undermatching pattern was not due to lack of ability, but rather a lack of structured support to manage the financial and procedural complexity of college planning.

Earlier studies have also shown that many low-income students overestimate college costs and lack personalized information about financial aid, contributing to confusion and anxiety about affordability (Hillman, 2016; Scott-Clayton, 2012). These misperceptions, when paired with procedural hurdles and the absence of knowledgeable advisors, often result in delayed applications, restricted college lists, or foregone enrollment (Bettinger et al., 2012; Castleman & Page, 2014; Perna & Kurban, 2013). The timing and clarity of information about net price and aid eligibility remain essential for supporting informed college decisions, especially for underserved student populations.

Significance of FAFSA

The timing of college application submissions plays a critical role in shaping students' postsecondary outcomes, particularly for those seeking institutional aid, scholarships, or access to limited resources such as campus housing. Many colleges and universities, including those within the KBOR system, have priority scholarship deadlines between November and February. In Kansas, state-level financial aid programs also require submission of the FAFSA by May 1 to ensure full eligibility for funding opportunities (KBOR, 2025). Students who miss these deadlines may still qualify for aid but are at a disadvantage for competitive awards and institutional benefits distributed on a first-come, first-served basis. The FAFSA serves as the primary gateway to most forms of federal, state, and institutional financial aid, including grants, loans, and work-study programs. Submitting the FAFSA is a necessary step for students seeking to reduce the financial burden of college attendance.

The FAFSA determines eligibility for Pell Grants, which provide substantial non-repayable aid to low-income students. It also qualifies students for subsidized federal loans and work-study opportunities. Without completing the FAFSA, many students, regardless of need, are automatically excluded from these forms of support. FAFSA completion is one of the strongest predictors of college enrollment. As described earlier, Bettinger et al. (2012) found that offering personalized assistance with FAFSA completion significantly increased college attendance among low-income students. These findings emphasize that simplifying the process and providing support can be just as important as the aid itself. In this way, FAFSA functions as both a financial and psychological signal that a student is college-bound. Unfortunately, FAFSA completion rates are significantly lower among first generation students, low income families, and students of color, with barriers including limited awareness, discomfort with financial

disclosure, and fear of debt, alongside procedural complexity that can discourage completion (Dynarski & Scott Clayton, 2006; Scott-Clayton, 2012; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Grodsky & Jones, 2007). As noted by Dynarski and Scott-Clayton (2006), the complexity of the FAFSA can discourage completion, particularly for families unfamiliar with financial documentation or the higher education system.

Because the FAFSA is used not only by the federal government but also by states and institutions, it plays a central role in determining college affordability. Many scholarship programs, tuition waiver initiatives, and state-based aid options require a completed FAFSA to determine eligibility. In Kansas and elsewhere, it acts as a cornerstone of need-based support. The FAFSA is also time-sensitive. Students who submit the form late, or not at all, may receive significantly less aid, limiting their college choices or ability to enroll. Early and accurate FAFSA completion can be the difference between enrolling in college or deferring postsecondary plans altogether.

Factors and Forces Shaping College Access

College access is not determined by a single factor but rather by an accumulation of conditions that either expand or restrict opportunity. Research consistently shows that access reflects the interplay of social, financial, informational, and institutional forces that shape aspirations, searches, and choices over time (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). Even academically capable students may struggle to navigate the pathway to higher education if financial strain, procedural complexity, or lack of support systems intervene (Avery & Kane, 2004; Roderick et al., 2011). These forces rarely operate in isolation; instead, they compound, leading to cumulative disadvantage for underserved populations and privileging those with greater resources (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).

Understanding these broad patterns is necessary to contextualize the need for interventions aimed at reducing barriers to access.

Financial resources remain among the most significant predictors of students going to college. Studies show that students from higher-income families are more likely to attend and complete college, while those from low-income households face persistent barriers tied to affordability and perceived cost (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Ma & Pender, 2023). Application fees, testing costs, and uncertainty about net price shape both the number and type of institutions students consider (Hoxby & Turner, 2015; Smith et al., 2014). Research demonstrates that even modest upfront expenses can deter applications among students from financially constrained backgrounds (Abourezk-Pinkstone, 2024; Becker, 2018). Moreover, perceptions of high tuition and limited aid can discourage engagement long before students formally apply, particularly for first generation families with little prior exposure to financial aid systems (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Perna & Kurban, 2013).

Informational and procedural complexity also shapes access by determining who can complete the many steps embedded in the application process. Scholars highlight how admissions procedures, financial aid applications, and testing requirements can create confusion that disproportionately impacts students with less guidance (Avery & Kane, 2004; Scott-Clayton, 2012). Students from families with limited exposure to postsecondary systems may lack the knowledge necessary to navigate these steps, leading to missed deadlines or incomplete applications (McDonough, 1997; Perna & Titus, 2005). Without structured guidance, these procedural demands can overwhelm students, particularly those already balancing work or family responsibilities. As such, complexity itself becomes a barrier that disproportionately

impacts students from under-resourced schools, even when they have strong aspirations and academic ability (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016).

Academic preparation and opportunity to learn remain structural determinants of access. Scholars consistently find that rigorous high school coursework and exposure to advanced learning opportunities are among the strongest predictors of later college success (Adelman, 2006; Conley, 2007). Yet access to challenging curricula is unevenly distributed, with students in underfunded schools less likely to encounter advanced courses, dual credit, or college preparatory programs (Fink et al., 2017; Klopfenstein, 2004). These disparities not only affect readiness for college-level work but also shape students' confidence and sense of belonging in academic spaces (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). When preparation is unequal, students' opportunities to pursue higher education are stratified along lines of race, income, and geography, reinforcing existing inequities in access.

Social and cultural forces also play an important role in shaping students' postsecondary pathways. Families, peers, teachers, and counselors provide essential encouragement and information about applying to college, but access to this college-going social capital is not evenly distributed (Bryan et al., 2011; McDonough, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Students whose networks lack knowledge about higher education may receive limited or inaccurate guidance, narrowing their understanding of available options (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Perna & Titus, 2005). Schools are expected to fill this gap, but large counselor caseloads and competing responsibilities often restrict the time available for individualized advising (Bryan et al., 2011; McDonough, 2005; McKillip et al., 2012; Savitz-Romer, 2012). As a result, students from under-resourced contexts frequently face reduced access to reliable, personalized support, which further stratifies outcomes across communities.

Geographic context introduces another dimension to college access that is often underexamined. Distance from campuses reduces opportunities for students to engage in college fairs, admissions events, or campus visits that are routine for their urban and suburban peers (Hillman, 2016). In rural areas, where many schools operate with limited staffing and fewer postsecondary partnerships, the absence of nearby institutions intensifies challenges related to information and support (Byun et al., 2012; Griffin et al., 2011; Provasnik et al., 2007). Geographic isolation also limits exposure to role models and reinforces local norms that may not prioritize college going, particularly college enrollment (Patel & Clinedinst, 2021; Showalter et al., 2023). Research demonstrates that barriers to college access are multidimensional, interrelated, and cumulative. Financial hurdles interact with procedural complexity, geographic isolation, and uneven access to academic and social capital to shape whether and where students apply (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Perna, 2006). These patterns highlight why interventions must be designed to target multiple barriers simultaneously rather than addressing a single obstacle in isolation (Castleman & Page, 2014; Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013).

The College Choice Process

College access is ultimately realized through the decisions students make as they progress from early aspirations to final enrollment. This section introduces the major theoretical frameworks that explain how students move through the college going process, with particular attention to the stages of predisposition, search, and choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) and the psychological and environmental mechanisms highlighted in Bandura's (1986) SCT. Together, these perspectives link structural conditions that shape opportunity—such as affordability, institutional characteristics, and access to advising—to individual behaviors that result in applications and enrollment by emphasizing self-efficacy, outcome expectations, observational

learning, and supportive environments. Within these frameworks, key influences such as academic readiness, college knowledge, FAFSA completion, perceived affordability, and family and peer networks shape the trajectory of college going. This section also draws on empirical studies that test these models, highlighting both the explanatory power of theory and the limitations when applied to underserved populations. Keeping the macro context in view clarifies why similarly prepared students make different choices under different constraints and supports, and it centers on how school-level environments and modeling such as counselor-led workshops and peer exemplars interact with students' self-beliefs to influence action.

The process of college decision-making has been well-theorized through foundational models such as Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase framework which includes predisposition, search, and choice, and Bandura's (1986) SCT, which explains how personal factors, behaviors, and environmental influences continuously interact to shape human behavior. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) framework emphasizes that college going is not a single decision, but a longitudinal process shaped by evolving aspirations, access to information, and social support. In the predisposition phase, students form college aspirations influenced by family background, cultural norms, and expectations. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) highlight that parental involvement and early academic preparation are critical during this phase, noting that students whose parents expect them to attend college and who achieve adequate academic preparation are significantly more likely to enroll in postsecondary education. SCT complements this by underscoring the role of self-efficacy and outcome expectations: students who believe they can successfully complete applications and who anticipate attainable, valued outcomes are more likely to initiate and persist in college going tasks.

In the search phase, students gather information, compare options, and engage in exploratory behaviors such as campus visits and discussions with school counselors. Perna (2006) integrates sociological and economic perspectives in her conceptual model of student college choice, finding that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face constrained searches due to limited access to information, fewer role models, and geographic barriers. From an SCT lens, observational learning and vicarious experiences, seeing peers apply, attending counselor-facilitated workshops, or watching near-peer mentors, can strengthen self-efficacy and expand perceived options, partially offsetting informational constraints (Bandura, 1987).

In the choice phase, students evaluate options using a complex blend of academic fit, cost, proximity, and institutional characteristics. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model emphasizes this stage as the culmination of earlier predispositions and searches, where students make concrete enrollment decisions. Bandura's (1986) SCT further explains how these choices are shaped by self-efficacy, expectations of outcomes, and the supports available in students' environments. Confidence in completing applications, encouragement from counselors, and the presence of peers who are also applying can all increase the likelihood that students will follow through with the process. Conversely, when support is absent, even academically prepared students may hesitate to apply, underscoring the importance of both personal beliefs and contextual influences in shaping final outcomes. Empirical evidence supports this perspective: Becker's (2018) analysis of students in CPS revealed that many enrolled in institutions aligned with their academic credentials but highlighted that procedural behaviors, such as completing the FAFSA and applying to multiple colleges, were among the strongest predictors of four-year enrollment. These findings reinforce that the decision to apply and enroll is not only a matter of

academic readiness but also of self-efficacy, access to guidance, and the timely completion of key application tasks.

Intervention strategies such as simplifying application procedures or reducing cost-related barriers align with the college choice stages of predisposition, search, and choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Castleman and Page (2015) conducted a multi-site randomized controlled trial to test the impact of low-cost summer interventions on college enrollment. The study focused on two strategies: personalized text messaging and peer mentoring for college-bound students from predominantly low-income backgrounds. The text messaging campaign sent ten automated, customized reminders about college tasks such as FAFSA completion, orientation registration, and financial aid paperwork. Students in Lawrence and Springfield, Massachusetts who received texts were over seven percentage points more likely to enroll than control group peers, with effects concentrated among those with limited prior college-planning support. The intervention cost was only \$7 per student and was especially effective for students who had not completed a FAFSA or lacked a clear postsecondary plan (Castleman & Page, 2015). Viewed through SCT, these timely prompts and near-peer models function as environmental supports and vicarious experiences that bolster self-efficacy and reduce intention or behavior gaps at the choice stage.

The peer mentor intervention, where current college students provided outreach and encouragement, increased four-year college enrollment by 4.5 percentage points (Castleman & Page, 2015). As with the text messages, effects were strongest among students with less-developed plans (Castleman & Page, 2015). SCT helps explain these gains: credible models and supportive feedback increase students' confidence to complete discrete tasks such as applications for admission and the FAFSA and sustain effort under constraint. Building on their earlier

assertion that financial support alone is insufficient, Page and Scott-Clayton (2016) conducted a synthesis of experimental and quasi-experimental studies to assess the effectiveness of college access interventions. Their findings underscore the importance of coupling fee waiver initiatives with personalized advising, timely outreach, and logical support especially for underserved populations. They emphasize that interventions must not only reduce financial and procedural hurdles but also be carefully timed to align with students' decision-making stages (e.g., those offering support during the choice phase rather than just early encouragement). This nuanced approach is shown to produce more consistent and measurable gains in application and enrollment outcomes.

College access and success remain sharply stratified along socioeconomic lines, with recent trends showing widening gaps in both enrollment and completion based on family income. Bailey and Dynarski (2011) found that over the thirty-year period beginning in 1980, income-based disparities in college entry, persistence, and completion all grew substantially. Children born into high-income families were increasingly advantaged, not only in their likelihood of enrolling in college but also in their chances of persisting and earning a degree. For example, the gap in college entry between students from the top and bottom income quartiles widened by 15 percentage points for women and seven percentage points for men (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). This divergence is particularly troubling given that the economic returns to a college degree have grown during the same period. The Bailey and Dynarski (2011) study also found that differences in high school completion explained about half the gap in college entry, but even among students who enrolled in college, low-income students were significantly less likely to persist and complete their degrees. This suggests that focusing solely on increasing access is insufficient; comprehensive strategies must also support students through to degree attainment.

Carnevale and Strohl (2013) reinforced these patterns, emphasizing that K–12 preparation, access to school-based supports, and financial barriers all contribute to systematic disparities in college enrollment and success. Drawing on extensive national datasets, including the Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS:2002), the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), and the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, their analysis examined enrollment patterns, institutional selectivity, and student demographics such as race, income, and academic ability. They used secondary data to evaluate how structural advantages and disadvantages shape college outcomes across the U.S. education system. Their findings showed that students from affluent families are significantly more likely to attend well-resourced high schools, complete rigorous academic coursework, and receive personalized college guidance (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). These advantages position them to enroll in selective postsecondary institutions with higher graduation rates and greater long-term economic benefits. In contrast, low-income students often attend under-resourced schools, face limited access to counseling and college advising, and lack clarity about financial aid processes. As a result, even academically qualified low-income students are more likely to undermatch, enrolling in less selective institutions with fewer resources and lower completion rates, thereby perpetuating inequality in college access and postsecondary outcomes (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).

This gap is especially troubling when academic qualifications are similar across groups. Bastedo and Jaquette (2011) conducted a national analysis using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) to investigate enrollment patterns among students with similar academic profiles but differing socioeconomic backgrounds. Their study specifically examined the phenomenon of undermatch, where students enroll in colleges that are less selective than their academic credentials would warrant. By focusing on students who were

academically qualified to attend more selective institutions, Bastedo and Jaquette (2011) found that low-income and first generation students were significantly more likely to undermatch compared to their more affluent peers. Their logistic regression models controlled for academic achievement, test scores, and high school characteristics, yet still revealed that income and parental education strongly predicted undermatch behavior (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011). They attributed this trend to a combination of financial constraints, lack of access to accurate college information, and limited geographic mobility, factors that disproportionately affect disadvantaged students and constrain their college choices. The phenomenon of undermatching suggests that students may not fully consider or pursue institutions that align with their academic credentials due to perceived or real barriers. This has implications for college persistence and graduation, as institutional fit and selectivity are correlated with postsecondary outcomes (Bowen et al. 2009).

While increasing college access is an important first step, the literature consistently emphasizes that access alone does not ensure equity. Simply opening the doors to postsecondary education does not guarantee student success, particularly for those who face systemic barriers related to affordability, academic preparation, campus climate, and cultural inclusion (Tinto, 2012). As Perna and Finney (2014) argue, equity in higher education requires more than admission; it demands that institutions provide students with the resources, support, and opportunities necessary to persist and complete their degrees.

Some scholars have called for a shift from access-centered approaches to equity-minded frameworks that intentionally identify and dismantle structural inequities affecting marginalized student populations (Bensimon, 2005). For instance, low-income, first generation, and minority students are disproportionately funneled into under-resourced institutions with lower graduation

rates, fewer support services, and limited financial aid counseling (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). These systemic disparities perpetuate educational stratification and hinder upward mobility, even in the presence of policies designed to widen access, such as fee waivers or open admissions (Alon & Tienda, 2005; Tinto, 2012).

Bastedo and Gumport (2003) highlight the dangers of access without support, cautioning that increasing enrollment opportunities without simultaneously addressing disparities in institutional capacity and student support may reinforce existing inequalities. In their critical analysis of organizational theory in higher education, they argue that massification, expanding access without corresponding investments in academic and social scaffolding, can lead to stratified outcomes where disadvantaged students are concentrated in under-resourced institutions with lower graduation rates (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003). These institutions often lack the advising, tutoring, and mentoring structures necessary to promote student success, particularly for those who are academically or financially at risk. As a result, expanding college access may create the illusion of equity while failing to close opportunity gaps.

Free college application campaigns, while they may be effective at increasing application rates, should be evaluated not only by volume but also by equity of impact, specifically, which student populations benefit and whether they ultimately enroll and succeed. Stratification theory further suggests that institutional selectivity and prestige remain unequally distributed, even when upfront barriers like application fees are removed (Alon & Tienda, 2005). Students from privileged backgrounds are more likely to access selective institutions with robust support systems, while others may remain concentrated in open-access colleges with fewer resources (Alon & Tienda, 2005; Bowen et al. 2005). Without intentional follow-through, interventions

aimed solely at applications may raise aspirations without equipping students with the self-efficacy or supports needed to persist.

Moreover, equity involves acknowledging and addressing unequal access to social capital and institutional knowledge that many students bring to college (Bandura, 1986). First-generation and minority students often lack access to networks that facilitate college navigation, leading to increased risk of isolation, confusion, and attrition (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). From an SCT perspective, culturally responsive advising and proactive peer models provide the observational learning and environmental reinforcement necessary to counter these risks (Bandura, 1986). Institutions that pair access initiatives with such supports promote belonging, persistence, and degree completion (Museus, 2014).

College Readiness

While frameworks such as Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model and Bandura's (1986) SCT offer valuable insights into the decision-making process, they often assume that students enter the college going process with a baseline level of preparation. However, for many students, particularly those from underserved populations, academic, procedural, and social readiness for college cannot be taken for granted.

College readiness encompasses more than academic achievement. Conley (2007) defines college readiness as the ability to succeed in entry-level college courses without remediation, which requires cognitive strategies, content knowledge, academic behaviors, and contextual skills such as understanding how college systems operate. Yet readiness is not equitably distributed. Students in low-income or rural schools are often denied access to challenging academic coursework, experienced postsecondary counselors, and a robust college going culture (Hill, 2008; Perna, 2006). These systemic inequities result in significant gaps in students'

preparation and self-efficacy to navigate the postsecondary environment, a core component of SCT, even before they begin the formal college search (Bandura, 1986).

College readiness should not fall solely on the shoulders of school counselors. While counselors play a vital role in supporting postsecondary planning, preparation must be approached as a shared responsibility. Research consistently shows that when entire school communities, including teachers, administrators, support staff, community partners, and families work collaboratively, students are more likely to engage in college going behaviors (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019; Bryan et al., 2011; Conley, 2010). Embedding college readiness into school-wide goals fosters a more coordinated and comprehensive effort that reaches students across academic and extracurricular settings (Hooker & Brand, 2010). For example, aligning high school curricula with college expectations, offering dual enrollment opportunities, and encouraging leadership development have been shown to increase both academic preparedness and student confidence in pursuing higher education (Karp & Hughes, 2008; Martinez, 2006).

Moreover, a strong, schoolwide college going culture can be particularly impactful for low-income and first generation students who may lack access to the social capital and navigational knowledge necessary to pursue postsecondary education (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; McClafferty et al., 2002). Schools that cultivate a shared vision and intentional messaging about college, reinforced across classrooms and student support systems, create an environment where college is seen as an attainable goal for all students (Conley, 2010; Corwin & Tierney, 2007). This holistic approach helps ensure that readiness is not just about eligibility or academic metrics, but also about equipping students with the motivation, skills, and guidance needed to transition successfully into postsecondary education.

Academic preparedness is also tied closely to course access and tracking. Adelman (2006), using longitudinal data from the U.S. Department of Education's High School and Beyond and National Education Longitudinal Study 1988 and 2000 cohorts, found the academic intensity and quality of a student's high school curriculum was the strongest predictor of college completion, surpassing GPA, class rank, or standardized test scores. Students who completed a rigorous sequence of courses, including advanced math beyond Algebra II, lab sciences, and core academic subjects, had significantly higher rates of bachelor's degree attainment (Adelman, 2006). This finding was especially prevalent for minority students. However, access to these opportunities remains highly unequal.

Students in under-resourced schools, especially those in low-income and rural areas, are less likely to be offered AP, IB, or dual credit classes due to limited funding, smaller teaching staff, or insufficient student demand (Fink et al. 2017; Klopfenstein, 2004). This lack of access not only constrains students' ability to earn college credit in high school but also sends implicit messages about who is expected to pursue higher education. Research shows that such disparities in course offerings and academic tracking lower students' academic self-concept and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986), reduce expectations, and influence postsecondary aspirations, particularly among students of color and those from low-income backgrounds (Bozick & Ingels, 2008). When students are not exposed to college-level rigor, they are less likely to view themselves as college material, regardless of their actual potential.

Beyond academics, procedural readiness, understanding how to complete college applications, apply for financial aid, or request recommendation letters, is another dimension of preparation. Many students from first generation or low-income backgrounds lack access to this type of procedural and cultural knowledge (McDonough, 1997), which Conley (2005) later

formalized as college knowledge. As Lareau (2011) explains, these students often do not benefit from the same level of parental guidance or institutional support as their more advantaged peers, placing them at a disadvantage when navigating the process independently.

Additionally, social and emotional readiness is essential. Students who have never visited a college campus or who do not have role models in higher education may feel unprepared or even unwelcome in those spaces (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010). Preparation includes building self-efficacy, help-seeking behaviors, and resilience necessary for the transition to college life. College readiness is not a single outcome but a multi-dimensional process requiring coordinated efforts across school systems. Preparation is both individual and institutional, shaped by the availability of rigorous coursework, aligned student advising, and a culture that normalizes postsecondary success.

Responsibility for ensuring postsecondary advising and preparation, as well as accountability for addressing college access, is both interrelated and central to understanding how students navigate the transition to higher education. These questions are not only interrelated but central to understanding how students navigate the transition to higher education. Page and Scott-Clayton (2016) highlight the ongoing debate surrounding the locus of responsibility for college access. While some argue that the burden falls primarily on students and their families, others maintain that secondary schools, postsecondary institutions, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations share collective responsibility for ensuring equitable pathways to college. Regardless of where responsibility is assigned, there is clear consensus in the literature that school counselors and educators require additional professional development and systemic support to provide effective postsecondary advising (McKillip et al., 2012; Perna et al., 2008). This need is especially acute in schools serving high-need populations,

where staff are frequently overextended and students face compounded barriers related to socioeconomic status, limited college knowledge, and restricted access to guidance resources (Bryan et al., 2011; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). Without a coordinated and well-supported approach, efforts to improve access and readiness risk falling short, particularly for those students who would benefit most.

College Knowledge

One critical but often underemphasized component of postsecondary preparation is college knowledge, which encompasses the information, skills, and social understanding required to effectively engage in the college going process. This concept, formulated by Conley (2005) and rooted in McDonough's (1997) work, includes procedural awareness of tasks such as researching institutions, preparing for and taking entrance exams, completing applications, applying for financial aid, and meeting enrollment deadlines. For many middle- and upper-class students, this knowledge is acquired informally through family conversations, school experiences, and peer networks. In contrast, students from underrepresented backgrounds often lack access to these informational and social resources, placing them at a distinct disadvantage.

Research has consistently shown that differences in college knowledge significantly impact students' postsecondary outcomes. For instance, Venezia and Kirst (2005) conducted an in-depth, multi-state study involving interviews and surveys with students, teachers, counselors, and administrators across K–12 and postsecondary systems in California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Oregon, and Texas. Their findings revealed that many high school students, especially those in low-income and minority-serving schools, were unaware of critical college admissions requirements, financial aid deadlines, and placement policies. These informational gaps were traced to systemic misalignment between K–12 and higher education, where high school

curricula often did not match college expectations, and counseling services were too limited to bridge that divide. Students frequently lacked structured guidance on course planning, test preparation, and application milestones, leaving them underprepared despite completing high school (Venezia & Kirst, 2005).

Similarly, Bell et al. (2009) conducted a qualitative case study of 15 high schools across five states, selected to represent a range of socioeconomic and academic contexts. Through focus groups and interviews with students, parents, and school personnel, they found that first generation students typically approached the college search and application process with limited access to accurate and actionable information. These students often relied on school counselors as their primary resource, yet the counselors interviewed described being overwhelmed with large caseloads and non-college-related responsibilities, making it difficult to provide individualized or timely support (Bell et al., 2009). As a result, students were left to navigate complex college admissions and financial aid systems with insufficient guidance, which negatively impacted their ability to make informed postsecondary decisions. Both studies underscore that informational inequality, not just academic readiness or financial constraints, plays a critical role in shaping college access and outcomes, particularly for students from historically underserved backgrounds.

Roderick et al. (2011) expanded the concept of college knowledge in their mixed-methods study of urban high school graduates in CPS. Drawing on longitudinal data, interviews, and surveys, they examined why many students, despite meeting academic qualifications, failed to enroll in college. Their findings revealed that even students with strong grade point averages (GPA) and test scores often stumbled over procedural barriers such as missing financial aid deadlines, failing to complete enrollment forms, or misunderstanding housing and placement test

requirements (Roderick et al., 2011). The researchers emphasized that academic readiness alone is insufficient for ensuring college enrollment and success. They argued that college knowledge, defined as understanding how to research, apply, enroll, and finance college, is often assumed rather than taught. This disproportionately disadvantages first generation, low-income, and minority students. In this view, college knowledge functions as a form of social capital, one that is inequitably distributed and deeply shaped by race, class, and geography. At the same time, these findings suggest that the challenge is not only informational but also motivational and contextual. Drawing on SCT, students' self-efficacy and access to credible models shape whether they act on available college knowledge. Even academically prepared students may hesitate to complete applications or the FAFSA when confidence is low or modeling is scarce, which helps explain why structured supports that provide guided practice and visible exemplars can translate knowledge into action (Lent & Brown, 2013; Pajares, 1996).

Moreover, college knowledge does not exist in a vacuum; it is cultivated, or constrained, by the structures of the school environment. Reid and Moore III (2008), in a qualitative study of first generation college students, found that those who participated in structured pre-college programs, such as TRIO or Upward Bound, were better equipped to navigate the steps of college planning and enrollment. Through interviews and biological questionnaires with 13 first generation urban college students, participants reported greater confidence in completing the FAFSA, applying to multiple colleges, and selecting a school that met their academic and financial needs (Reid & Moore III, 2008). These students also described how college knowledge was developed over time through intentional instruction, mentorship, and access to real-world college experiences, such as campus visits and financial aid workshops. The study's findings reinforce the argument that college knowledge is not innate but teachable and should be

explicitly embedded in school advising frameworks and curricula (Reid and Moore III, 2008). Without such scaffolding, students are left to navigate a complex system with inconsistent support and incomplete information.

In rural and high-poverty communities, where fewer families have direct college experience and school counseling resources are stretched thin, these challenges are further amplified. Howley et al. (2011) noted that many rural schools operate with high student-to-counselor ratios, sometimes employing just one counselor to cover academic, personal, and postsecondary advising needs. ASCA (2019) recommends a ratio of one counselor for every 250 students, but as of the 2024–2025 school year, Kansas maintains an average ratio of 1:319, well above the recommended level (KSDE, 2024). In such environments, students often lack exposure to college going role models, have fewer opportunities to attend college fairs or financial aid nights, and receive inconsistent messaging about the value of postsecondary education (Corwin and Tierney, 2007; Griffin et al., 2011). These disparities in access are particularly problematic given the increasing complexity of the college going process and the growing importance of postsecondary credentials in today's economy.

Ultimately, ensuring that all students acquire college knowledge is a matter of educational equity. As Conley (2005) argues, postsecondary success requires more than mastery of academic content; it demands that students understand and operate within the norms, expectations, and bureaucratic systems of higher education. His model of college readiness includes not only cognitive strategies and content knowledge, but also contextual skills such as self-advocacy, time management, and knowledge of the admissions and financial aid process (Conley, 2005). Bridging this knowledge gap requires more than piecemeal interventions. It calls for intentional, school-wide strategies that deliver comprehensive, sustained, and inclusive

support, particularly for students least likely to receive this information outside of school. Embedding college knowledge into curriculum, advisory periods, parent outreach, and extracurricular programming can help ensure that every student, regardless of background, has the tools to pursue and succeed in postsecondary education.

Role of Informational Interventions

The concept of information complexity is central to understanding barriers that prevent students from successfully accessing college. Even after gaining admission, many students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, struggle to complete final steps such as FAFSA verification, orientation registration, or housing deposits (Castleman & Page, 2014). These procedural hurdles often go unaddressed due to a lack of timely, personalized guidance following high school graduation. Such informational strategies are not universally effective. Building on findings from Becker's (2018) Chicago-based study, previously discussed in relation to student decision-making, it is evident that procedural barriers such as limited access to technology, adult guidance, or time can inhibit students from completing essential steps in the enrollment process. Many students juggle work, caregiving, or transportation challenges, leaving them with limited mental and emotional bandwidth. This bandwidth tax, described by Mullainathan and Shafir (2013), diminishes cognitive resources, making it harder to navigate even relatively simple procedural tasks. As presented earlier, the role of school counselors in mitigating these barriers is important to reiterate. Structural challenges such as high student-to-counselor ratios continue to undermine access to individualized support (Belasco, 2013). Without adequate institutional investment in advising infrastructure, even the most thoughtfully designed interventions may fail to reach the students who need them most.

Importantly, free college application campaigns may raise awareness and encourage students to begin the application process, but intentions alone are not enough. Klasik (2012) argues that each stage in the college application process represents a distinct hurdle that disproportionately filters out disadvantaged students. To ensure fee waiver efforts translate into actual enrollment, schools and policymakers must pair them with targeted advising, peer mentorship, and persistent communication that helps students navigate the post-acceptance phase.

Social, School-Based, Familial, and Peer Influences on College Decision-Making

While structural and economic barriers to higher education have been extensively documented, a growing body of research underscores the equally powerful role that social context and school-based supports play in shaping students' college going behaviors. Postsecondary decisions are rarely made in isolation; rather, they are embedded within a network of relationships, norms, and institutional supports that influence students' aspirations, confidence, and capacity to act. For low-income, first generation, and underrepresented students in particular, access to college is often mediated by the availability and quality of advising, family encouragement, peer influence, and school-level interventions. This section explores how postsecondary advising, technical application support, family expectations, peer norms, and the implementation of school-based campaigns, such as Kansas Free Application Days, collectively shape student decision-making. In doing so, it highlights the critical role of educators, counselors, and communities in either reinforcing or reducing existing inequities in college access and enrollment outcomes.

Role of Postsecondary Advising and Institutional Supports

Postsecondary advising plays a pivotal role in shaping students' access to and success within the college going process, particularly for those from historically underrepresented or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. A robust body of research shows that students who receive sustained, individualized college advising are significantly more likely to apply to and enroll in postsecondary institutions (Castleman & Goodman, 2015; Hoxby & Turner, 2013). This support is especially critical during the transition from high school to college, a period often marked by a series of complex, high-stakes decisions that may be unfamiliar to students and families lacking experience with higher education systems.

Programs such as College Possible (Avery, 2013) and SOURCE (Bos et al., 2012) provide compelling models of how structured, relationship-based advising can positively influence students' postsecondary trajectories. These initiatives extend well beyond providing information; they offer sustained, personalized support that guides students through each step of the college application and enrollment process, building confidence and resilience along the way. College Possible is a nationally recognized program that targets low-income and first generation students, delivering coaching on college readiness and access beginning in the junior year and continuing through college enrollment (Avery, 2013). Avery's (2013) evaluation of the program found that participants were significantly more likely to complete the FAFSA, submit college applications, and ultimately enroll in college compared to their peers. This success is largely attributed to the program's consistent, individualized advising relationships, which fosters trust and equips students with critical skills over time.

Similarly, the SOURCE program, studied by Bos et al. (2012), serves disadvantaged students in urban settings through a comprehensive, year-round model of advising that includes

academic support, financial aid guidance, and career exploration. The research showed that students engaged with SOURCE were more proactive in navigating their college options, interpreting financial aid packages, and overcoming enrollment barriers (Bos et al., 2012). This holistic approach illustrates how tailored, ongoing advising can help demystify the college process and empower students to make informed decisions aligned with their goals and financial realities.

Typical advising activities within these programs include raising awareness of diverse college pathways, helping students develop balanced college lists, supporting test preparation, ensuring timely and accurate application submissions, facilitating FAFSA completion, interpreting award letters, and guiding conversations about institutional fit and affordability. The longitudinal and personalized nature of these interventions is particularly impactful, helping students persist through academic, financial, and personal challenges on the road to college enrollment. Importantly, such support fills critical gaps for students who may otherwise lack access to college knowledge (McDonough, 1997). As previously discussed by McDonough (1997), this knowledge includes awareness of key tasks such as researching institutions, completing applications, and interpreting financial aid information. Without structured advising, first generation and low-income students may miss critical deadlines, misunderstand award letters, or make enrollment decisions that are financially or academically misaligned with their needs.

Advisors play a critical role in guiding students through foundational steps of the application and enrollment process. Dunlop Velez (2020) found that students who met one-on-one with a school counselor to discuss college admissions or financial aid were significantly more likely to submit the FAFSA, attend college, and enroll in a bachelor's degree program.

These meetings, often shaped by school-level factors such as counselor time allocation and the presence of structured college preparation programs, had measurable impacts on postsecondary outcomes, particularly for low-income and underrepresented students. While school counselors are often positioned to provide this support, many report feeling underprepared to offer detailed guidance on college admissions and financial aid (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). In high-need schools, where counselor caseloads routinely exceed the ASCA recommended ratio, competing demands and limited time can severely constrain counselors' ability to engage in comprehensive college advising (ASCA, 2024). As a result, students who would benefit most from individualized support are often those least likely to receive it.

Technical and Procedural Application Assistance

In addition to one-on-one advising, students benefit from technical and procedural support that helps them complete the numerous administrative steps required for college applications. These steps often include navigating online application platforms, managing multiple institutional portals, meeting scholarship deadlines, and uploading transcripts and test scores. For students without reliable access to adult guidance, these logistical hurdles can significantly impede progress (Roderick et al., 2011). Campaigns such as Kansas Free Application Days address one major barrier, the application fee, but cost elimination alone does not ensure successful application completion. As noted earlier, interventions that combine financial relief with personalized advising yield stronger outcomes (Bettinger et al., 2012; Castleman & Page, 2015). As schools seek to expand postsecondary access, many rely on partnerships with community-based organizations, near-peer mentors, or higher education outreach coordinators to supplement school-based advising. These collaborations can be

particularly effective in environments where school counselors have limited time or training to engage in intensive college counseling.

Family and Peer Influence on College Decisions

Beyond school-based interventions, family and peer dynamics exert profound influence on students' college going decisions. These social contexts contribute to students' aspirations, beliefs about college affordability, and confidence in navigating the application process. While initiatives like the Kansas Free Application Days can remove financial barriers, the social capital students bring, or lack, can significantly shape whether and how they take advantage of such opportunities. Walpole (2003) found that family expectations and peer norms significantly influence college decision-making. Drawing on data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, which included survey responses from more than 12,000 students, Walpole (2003) found that first generation and low-income students were less likely to receive encouragement to pursue college from parents and peers. These students also reported lower expectations for their educational attainment and less confidence in navigating the college admissions process. Students from families with limited college experience often lack both knowledge and support systems necessary to pursue postsecondary education. As a result, universal initiatives such as free college application campaigns must be complemented by efforts that actively engage families and communities to build more supportive college going environments.

Family Influence

Parental involvement and expectations are among the most consistent predictors of postsecondary enrollment, particularly during the early predisposition phase of the college choice process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). In their longitudinal analyses of national datasets, Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) found that students whose parents expected them to attend college and who

were involved in their academic progress were significantly more likely to persist through the stages of college preparation and ultimately enroll in postsecondary education. This early support lays the foundation for later behaviors such as application submission and FAFSA completion. Students with college-educated parents often benefit from what Bourdieu (1986) termed cultural capital, which are non-financial social assets such as knowledge of higher education systems, norms, and expectations that facilitate academic advancement. Perna and Titus (2005), analyzing data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1992 and 1994, found that students whose parents had attended college were more likely to receive help with college applications, complete the FAFSA, and meet critical deadlines. Their study demonstrated that parental education and involvement remained significant predictors of college enrollment even after controlling for income and academic achievement.

In contrast, first generation and low-income students frequently lack access to this form of college-related support (Engberg & Allen, 2011; Gibbons & Borders, 2010). Engberg and Allen (2011), drawing on weighted national data representing over 903,000 students, found that students from low-income backgrounds were significantly less likely to report receiving help with college going tasks from their families. Their study highlighted how differences in cultural and social capital, such as parent-student conversations about college, aspirational influences, and access to informed networks, contributed to enrollment disparities. Similarly, Gibbons and Borders (2010), using social-cognitive career theory, studied the college going expectations of seventh grade students and found that prospective first generation college students reported significantly lower college going self-efficacy, higher perceived barriers, and less social support than their peers whose parents had attended college. These students were more likely to doubt their ability to succeed in college and identified concerns such as financial stress, limited role

models, and inadequate guidance as barriers to their aspirations. Although many aspired to postsecondary education, the absence of strong parental and school-based support systems shaped more negative outcome expectations and lower confidence in achieving college goals. However, this does not mean these students lack the resources to succeed; rather, their strengths are often undervalued by traditional measures of college readiness. Yosso's (2005) theory of community cultural wealth highlights the role of aspirational and navigational capital, students' ability to maintain hope and maneuver through complex systems, as critical assets that help underserved students access and persist in postsecondary pathways.

McDonough's (1997) ethnographic research revealed that high school guidance structures are often stratified by socioeconomic status, with wealthier students receiving more personalized college advising and lower-income students receiving generalized, less proactive support. In settings where counselors have high caseloads or limited college advising training, students without strong family support may fall behind their more advantaged peers, even when initiatives like free college application campaigns reduce cost barriers. Research also shows that families influence how students perceive college affordability and financial risk. Grodsky and Jones (2007), analyzing survey data, found that lower-income families consistently overestimated the actual cost of college attendance and were less likely to understand the availability of grants or need-based aid. These misperceptions acted as psychological deterrents, discouraging students from applying even when they were eligible for substantial financial support. Grodsky and Jones (2007) argued that improving financial literacy among students and families could significantly enhance college application rates among low-income populations.

Peer Influence

Peers significantly shape educational expectations and behaviors, particularly during adolescence when social belonging and identity are highly influential (Brown et al., 1986). Becker (2018) emphasized that students embedded in peer groups with strong academic norms were more likely to exhibit ambitious college going behaviors, reinforcing the idea that social context impacts decision-making. This dynamic is especially relevant in the context of schoolwide campaigns like Kansas Free Application Days, which can harness peer influence by making college going behavior visible and normalized. When college application becomes a shared activity amplified by school culture through banners, announcements, and celebratory events, students may feel encouraged to participate, even if they initially lack individual confidence or support at home. As discussed earlier, Castleman and Page (2015) demonstrated that behavioral nudges and peer mentoring interventions effectively increased college enrollment, particularly among students with limited prior planning or support. Their findings underscore the importance of cultivating environments where postsecondary transitions are seen as attainable and expected. By embedding college applications within a communal, peer-supported framework, free application initiatives can shift norms and encourage broader participation, particularly in schools where college going is not yet the default expectation.

Equity Considerations

Family and peer influences intersect with broader issues of equity and access. In under-resourced schools, students may lack exposure to adults or peers who have successfully pursued postsecondary education, diminishing the available network of support (Perna & Jones, 2013). In contrast, schools that foster a strong college going culture, where postsecondary planning is embedded into school rituals and peer experiences, are more likely to help students overcome

these gaps (Roderick et al., 2011). Moreover, peer-based interventions such as college going ambassadors, senior mentors, or classroom-based application drives have proven effective in increasing application rates and fostering positive norms (Roderick et al., 2011). By leveraging peer influence, these models transform what can feel like an isolating and intimidating process into a shared, celebrated milestone.

Geographic Access

Geographic location is a key but often underexamined factor influencing students' access to postsecondary advising and support services. In Kansas and other predominantly rural states, the distribution of colleges and universities is uneven, meaning that students in remote communities may be one to three hours away from the nearest public postsecondary institution. This physical distance significantly limits access to in-person advising events, campus visits, college fairs, and admissions workshops that urban or suburban students can more readily attend. As a result, rural students may have fewer opportunities to engage directly with admissions professionals or to develop a personal understanding of postsecondary options (Hillman, 2016). Provasnik et al. (2007) noted that more than half of U.S. school districts and nearly one-third of all public schools are located in rural areas, serving approximately 10 million students, many of whom face unique educational and geographic challenges.

Research consistently shows that proximity to a college increases the likelihood of enrollment, especially for low-income and first generation students. Hillman (2016) found that students living closer to postsecondary institutions are more likely to enroll, due in part to lower transportation and housing costs, reduced logistical complexity, and the ability to remain near family or work commitments. Similarly, Page and Scott-Clayton (2016) emphasized that geographic distance can serve as a hidden deterrent, particularly when paired with limited access

to guidance, reducing both the intention to enroll and actual matriculation rates. In rural areas, these barriers are compounded by social and structural isolation. Byun et al., (2012) showed that rural students often experience a lack of exposure to postsecondary role models and informal college going norms. Without access to peer and community networks that promote college attendance, students may have fewer opportunities to gather information or develop aspirations related to higher education. The absence of this college going social capital makes it harder for students to envision themselves on a college campus or to understand the steps necessary to get there.

These geographic barriers are compounded by limited advising capacity in rural and high-poverty schools, where counselors often carry larger caseloads and multiple responsibilities, leaving less time for individualized postsecondary guidance (Belasco, 2013; Bryan et al., 2011; McDonough, 2005). With fewer opportunities for advanced coursework or dual enrollment, students face additional hurdles to readiness (Johnson & Howley, 2015). At the same time, rural students may experience weaker college going norms and reduced social capital, making it more difficult to envision themselves pursuing higher education (Byun et al., 2012; Griffin et al., 2011).

When higher education institutions are distant, school-level partnerships and outreach efforts become even more critical. Initiatives like Kansas Free Application Days and Apply Kansas serve as practical solutions by delivering college application resources directly to high school campuses, thus helping to mitigate the disadvantages of geographic isolation. These efforts are particularly important in rural communities, where students are less likely to participate in college fairs or attend on-campus admissions events without external support

(KBOR, 2025). However, the effectiveness of these programs often depends on a school's internal capacity to organize events and connect students with available resources.

Students in rural areas also report turning to different sources for college going information compared to their urban peers. In a national study of more than 8,700 rural high school students, Griffin et al. (2011) found that the most common sources of guidance were parents or guardians (72.2%), friends (55.4%), teachers (46.2%), and school counselors (41.9%). Notably, students in rural and low-income schools were significantly more likely to view teachers as the most helpful source of information compared to their peers in higher income or small-town schools (Griffin et al., 2011). The researchers also identified differences by grade level. Students in upper grades were more likely to seek out and benefit from interactions with school counselors, while younger students relied more heavily on family and peers (Griffin et al., 2011). These findings reinforce concerns about uneven access to timely, proactive, and culturally responsive advising, as noted by Bryan et al. (2011) and Belasco (2013). They highlight the need for greater collaboration among counselors, teachers, and families in rural communities to ensure that accurate and actionable postsecondary information reaches all students, particularly those attending under-resourced schools.

Johnson et al. (2014) further emphasized that over 9.7 million students, which is more than 20% of the nation's public-school population, are enrolled in rural schools, many of which are chronically underfunded and serve growing populations of students living in poverty or requiring special education services. Despite the increasing national relevance of rural education, these students and schools remain largely invisible in state policy discussions. This invisibility contributes to systemic gaps in support for postsecondary transitions and reinforces the importance of targeted outreach strategies tailored to the needs of rural learners.

These findings suggest that in Kansas and other geographically dispersed states, location frequently determines the level of advising, access, and support a student receives. Tailoring outreach strategies to rural and underserved communities, through localized partnerships, mobile advising models, and sustained investment in school capacity, can help close the access gap and expand opportunity for students regardless of where they live.

Why Kansas

Kansas offers a distinctive opportunity to study how a coordinated, system-wide free application campaign operates in practice. While many states provide fee waivers in limited or fragmented ways, Kansas has recently piloted a statewide initiative that removes application fees across all public institutions and participating private institutions. This universal approach makes Kansas one of the first states to test whether such campaigns expand access or simply redistribute applications across institutions (Castleman & Page, 2015; Dunlop Velez, 2020; Hoxby & Turner, 2013). The state's internal diversity strengthens its value as a case. Kansas contains urban, suburban, and rural districts within one policy environment, creating a natural laboratory for analyzing how locale shapes both student responses and counselor implementation. Rurality is an important part of this variation but not the sole rationale; instead, Kansas provides a microcosm of the challenges and opportunities faced across the U.S. (Byun et al., 2012; Showalter et al., 2023). Equally important, Kansas's pilot reflects a willingness to innovate at scale. By embedding the initiative in a statewide campaign implemented directly through high schools, the state compresses information, affordability cues, and application support into accessible, counselor-facilitated events. This alignment of policy and practice positions Kansas as a nationally significant test bed for understanding the potential of coordinated, universal fee-waiver initiatives.

Evidence on Barriers and Interventions in College Access

While earlier sections outlined the broad forces that constrain college opportunity, this section turns to research examining how specific barriers can be reduced or mediated through targeted interventions. Studies consistently show that financial, informational, procedural, and geographic challenges not only limit access but also interact to compound inequities (Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Perna & Kurban, 2013). At the same time, a growing body of evidence demonstrates that relatively modest supports such as application fee waivers, personalized advising, and school-based campaigns, can increase the likelihood that students, particularly those from underserved groups, apply to and enroll in college.

This section examines three categories of intervention. First, it considers application fee waivers and statewide campaigns that reduce financial hurdles and signal openness from institutions. Second, it looks at broader financial and procedural supports, including aid application simplification and low-cost policy adjustments that improve student–college match quality. Third, it turns to informational and advising interventions, where counselors, teachers, and access professionals provide hands-on guidance and encouragement. Across all three areas, rural contexts present unique implementation challenges. Sparse advising infrastructure, limited exposure to postsecondary options, and distance from institutions mean that interventions often need tailoring to ensure equitable reach. Research highlights that when campaigns like school-based FAFSA completion initiatives are paired with localized outreach, even students in geographically isolated areas benefit (Clayton & Umbach, 2020; KBOR, 2025; Roderick et al., 2011). By organizing the evidence around these categories, this section emphasizes not only the persistence of barriers but also the practical strategies that reduce them. The central theme is that financial relief alone is insufficient. However, when combined with advising, outreach, and

context-sensitive delivery, interventions could be more effective at expanding access for all students.

Application Fees

One frequently cited financial barrier to college access is the application fee. Undergraduate application fees at four-year public and private non-profit colleges ranged from \$0 to \$300, with the most common fee at \$50 and an average of \$40 (Abourezk-Pinkstone, 2024). Application fees accumulate quickly, especially for students applying to multiple institutions. In Kansas, application fees range from \$25 to \$50. For students from low-income or first generation backgrounds, the financial burden can deter application submission altogether (Hoxby & Turner, 2015; Smith, 2014). Research consistently finds that these costs disproportionately affect underrepresented students, shaping both the number of applications submitted and the types of institutions students consider (Abourezk-Pinkstone, 2024; Becker, 2018).

To address these barriers, policymakers and education leaders have increasingly implemented free college application campaigns to improve access (Abourezk-Pinkstone, 2024; Clayton & Umbach, 2020; Dunlop Velez, 2020; Glynn, 2017; Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Smith, 2014). The Kansas Free Application Days, launched statewide in 2023, reflect a growing national trend aimed at reducing the upfront cost of applying to college. Abourezk-Pinkstone (2024) acknowledges that future research should explore whether fee-free campaigns divert students from other colleges, simply increase total applications, or shift preferences within the same tier of selectivity. Statewide campaigns like the Kansas Free Application Days offer a coordinated alternative to institution-level competition, promoting access while encouraging system-wide gains. When embedded within broader advising strategies and public awareness

efforts, such initiatives may help ensure that fee waivers do more than redistribute applications but rather expand opportunity. Such inquiry forms the foundation of this study, which examines whether such interventions expand access, shift enrollment patterns, and promote equity among underserved students.

The Kansas Free Application Days allows students to apply to all public institutions and participating private colleges without paying a fee. This campaign aligns with similar national efforts such as North Carolina's College Application Week and Minnesota's College Knowledge Month, which have demonstrated notable increases in application rates among low-income and first generation students (American Council on Education, 2018; Clayton & Umbach, 2020; Roderick et al., 2011). Similarly, Indiana's College GO! Week combined statewide fee waivers with targeted counselor-led support through its Learn More Indiana initiative. According to the Indiana Commission for Higher Education documentation, institutions waived application fees for all seniors during the event, while school counseling teams offered in-school advising and assistance (Learn More Indiana, n.d.). This pairing of financial relief with advising proved effective at increasing participation, underscoring that fee waivers are most impactful when complemented by hands-on guidance (Carrell & Sacerdote, 2013; Castleman & Page, 2015; Oreopoulos & Ford, 2016; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016).

These campaigns also contribute to narrowing equity gaps by encouraging applications from students who might otherwise forgo college due to cost concerns (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Hoxby & Turner, 2015). Castleman and Page (2015) found that fee waivers were especially effective when paired with counselor-led advising, suggesting that financial relief alone is insufficient. Similarly, Oreopoulos and Ford (2016) examined a series of high school-based workshops in Ontario, Canada, designed to support students attending low-transition high

schools through multiple phases of the college application process. The workshops included program exploration, application completion with the opportunity to apply to up to five community colleges or three universities at no cost, and guided support with the financial aid application process. Application fee relief was provided through a two-step process requiring students to complete specific steps to access no-cost applications to up to five community colleges or three universities. Following participation in these workshops, college application rates increased by 13 percentage points and postsecondary enrollment increased by more than five percentage points. These findings affirm that financial and procedural support together generate greater impact.

In a large-scale randomized controlled trial, Hoxby and Turner (2015) conducted the comprehensive Expanding College Opportunities (ECO-C) intervention by providing personalized college information and no-paperwork application fee waivers to approximately 18,000 high-achieving, low-income students, including 3,000 who served as a control group. The intervention included no-paperwork application fee waivers, personalized materials about college options and net costs, and simplified guidance on applying to selective institutions, all at a cost of approximately \$6 per student. The results showed a significant increase in both applications to and enrollment at selective colleges, which often have better graduation rates and offer more financial aid. Importantly, students who enrolled in more selective institutions performed just as well academically as those who attended less selective colleges. These findings underscore how relatively low-cost, information-rich interventions can help students make better college matches, ultimately improving their academic and economic outcomes.

Research by Abourezk-Pinkstone (2024) offers robust evidence that institutions eliminating college application fees significantly boosts both application and enrollment rates,

particularly among underrepresented groups, including low-income, Black, and Hispanic students. Employing a difference-in-difference design and event study methodology, the study found that institutions implementing a \$0 application fee led to a 10–15% increase in applications and a 3–7% rise in first-time college enrollment. These gains were especially concentrated among students from historically underrepresented backgrounds. Notably, the presence of even one nearby competing institution offering a fee waiver was sufficient to shift application patterns, suggesting that students are highly responsive to marginal changes in cost. This study provides causal evidence that fee waivers act not only as access tools but also as competitive levers in an increasingly stratified admissions landscape.

Behavioral economics provides a useful lens for understanding these effects. Concepts like loss aversion and bounded rationality help explain why students, especially first generation applicants, may limit the number of colleges they apply to, fearing wasted fees or perceived rejection (Castleman & Page, 2014; Hoxby & Turner, 2015). Hoxby and Avery (2013) identified a market mismatch phenomenon in which high-achieving, low-income students bypass selective institutions, deterred by application costs and unfamiliarity. In their analysis of data from the high school graduating class of 2008 who took either the ACT or SAT, they found that the majority of these students failed to apply to any selective colleges, despite being academically well-matched. Using College Board and institutional records, they documented that high-achieving, low-income students often enrolled at local, non-selective institutions, even when selective colleges would have provided better financial aid and academic outcomes (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). One contributing factor was the application fee itself, which, while relatively small in absolute terms, served as a psychological and financial signal of exclusivity. Programs like Kansas Free Application Days, which explicitly eliminate this cost and signal institutional

openness, may help counter such perceptions and foster more inclusive and aspirational college application behavior.

Bastedo and Flaster (2014) argue that undermatching may reflect rational responses to financial aid and informational constraints, rather than poor judgement or personal shortcomings on the part of students. Smith et al. (2014) found that opaque or burdensome application requirements further discourage students from applying, especially when combined with cost. This pragmatic yet constrained decision-making contributes to undermatching, whereby students enroll in less selective institutions than their academic credentials would allow, despite evidence that attending more selective institutions is associated with higher graduation rates and long-term returns (Alon, 2009; Bowen et al., 2009).

Application fee waivers, especially those distributed universally during limited-time campaigns, reduce these constraints and encourage broader application behavior. Dynarski and Scott-Clayton (2006) found that reducing even minor procedural or financial hurdles can lead to disproportionately large behavioral changes. Castleman and Page (2014) demonstrated that students receiving fee waivers and text-based reminders were significantly more likely to complete applications and enroll.

Smith (2014) further quantifies the impact of application fees on college enrollment by examining how the number of applications submitted correlates with enrollment probability. The study analyzed a nationally representative sample of 5,970 U.S. students from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, which tracked high school sophomores through their transition to postsecondary education. Using instrumental variables estimation, Smith (2014) found that submitting one additional college application increases the probability of enrollment by approximately 6.1 percentage points. Given a baseline enrollment rate of 75%, this translates into

an 8.1% increase, an effect Smith (2104) deems meaningful. This evidence demonstrates that the cost-related decision to limit applications can reduce a student's overall likelihood of enrolling in any college, particularly when multiple application fees add up to a prohibitive financial burden. These findings have strategic implications for both equity and enrollment management. Becker (2018) used conditional logit models to show that low-income students and underserved populations are especially sensitive to out-of-pocket costs and are more likely to apply to institutions with visible affordability signals, such as waived application fees or generous aid.

As Page and Scott-Clayton (2016) caution, reducing financial barriers is necessary but insufficient on its own. Addressing informational, logistical, and personal challenges is critical for fully supporting students' postsecondary transitions. Collectively, these findings affirm that free application campaigns are most effective when embedded within comprehensive strategies that tackle multiple barriers. This comprehensive approach reflects the interconnected factors highlighted in the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model, which emphasizes that postsecondary decisions unfold across predisposition, search, and choice phases. Removing application fees may help shift students into the search or choice phase earlier, but lasting equity gains depend on aligning support throughout all stages of the process. While application fees represent only one barrier among many, their influence is well-documented. The elimination of this cost must be viewed not as the solution but as a gateway, an initial point of intervention that, when combined with advising, outreach, and informational support, creates the conditions for more equitable access to postsecondary education.

Financial

Beyond the cost of application fees, a broader range of financial barriers can discourage students from starting or completing the college application process. For underserved

populations, these obstacles begin well before enrollment and often surface during the initial stages of applying for admission and financial aid. A study by Bettinger et al. (2012) demonstrated that even small procedural hurdles, such as completing the FAFSA, can significantly impact college access. In a randomized field experiment conducted in Ohio, families receiving tax preparation services through H&R Block were randomly assigned to receive either (1) hands-on FAFSA assistance using pre-filled tax data, (2) only general college financial aid information, or (3) no additional support. The treatment group who received this intervention were eight percentage points more likely to have completed two years of college within three years, increasing from 28% to 36% (Bettinger et al., 2012). Notably, families who received only financial aid information, without assistance, experienced no measurable benefits. These findings show that procedural complexity, not just affordability, can serve as a critical barrier to college access and success, particularly for families unfamiliar with postsecondary systems.

The FAFSA process itself can feel especially daunting for students without college-educated parents or those unfamiliar with financial documentation. According to Scott-Clayton (2012), many students fail to complete the FAFSA not because they are ineligible, but because they misunderstand the eligibility criteria, are unaware of deadlines, or incorrectly assume they won't qualify for aid. This lack of understanding, when paired with broader concerns about cost, leads some students to forgo the application process entirely. Together, these studies underscore the importance of not only reducing financial barriers but also simplifying processes and providing personalized support at critical points in the college application journey.

Pallais (2015) examined how a small reduction in the cost of sending ACT score reports, specifically, increasing the number of free score reports from three to four, significantly

influenced student application behavior. Using a quasi-experimental difference-in-differences approach, Pallais (2015) found that this minor cost change led to a substantial increase in the number of applications submitted by low-income students and increased their likelihood of enrolling in more selective colleges. These findings underscore how even small, low-cost policy adjustments can drive meaningful behavioral shifts and improve student-college match quality. Nonetheless, the impact of fee waivers is not uniform across all demographics or school contexts. Traditional fee waivers often require proof of financial hardship, which can create procedural barriers or stigma that discourage use (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006). In contrast, free application campaigns typically remove eligibility restrictions, offering universal access to fee waivers for a limited period, thereby reaching a broader and more diverse student population.

Informational and Procedural

Procedural complexity, including a confusing application process, varying deadlines, essay requirements, testing expectations, and platform navigation can deter college enrollment. These barriers are especially acute for students from underserved populations, who are unfamiliar with the college going process and have limited access to timely, personalized advising. For these students, the intersection of procedural complexity and insufficient support can significantly undermine their ability to navigate the transition to postsecondary education (Avery & Kane, 2004; Hoxby & Turner, 2013). Perna and Jones (2013) highlight the importance of informational and motivational support alongside financial interventions. Without guidance and encouragement, many students, particularly those from underserved populations, remain disengaged from the application process. As Eggleston (2023) highlights, these challenges are not only informational but also psychological. First generation and underrepresented students frequently report lower self-efficacy, heightened anxiety, and confusion about admissions and

financial aid systems, which further undermines their ability to persist through the application process.

These affective dimensions are what Strayhorn (2012) refers to as college going anxiety and help explain why some students disengage despite having postsecondary aspirations. Psychological theories of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) suggest that students who lack confidence in their academic preparedness or view college as financially unattainable may internalize these barriers, reducing their motivation to apply. While fee waiver initiatives help alleviate cost concerns, they do not directly address the emotional and psychological barriers students face. Interventions that combine financial support with proactive counseling, affirming peer relationships, and early exposure to postsecondary environments are more likely to foster both the belief and capability to pursue higher education.

Avery and Kane (2004) found that even students who aspired to attend college often failed to submit applications because of informational gaps or procedural misunderstandings. Despite strong intentions, many lacked access to timely, personalized guidance and frequently missed important deadlines or submitted incomplete applications. Their research highlighted key college going milestones, graduating high school, achieving an adequate GPA, registering for and taking the SAT, and completing at least one application and the FAFSA, that serve as critical benchmarks (Avery & Kane, 2004). Students who received support completing these steps were substantially more likely to enroll in four-year institutions, demonstrating that structured, milestone-focused interventions can meaningfully influence postsecondary outcomes.

While the ECO-C study by Hoxby and Turner (2013) is well known for its focus on fee waivers and targeted college information, its broader contribution lies in demonstrating how streamlined, low-cost interventions, offering both financial and informational resources, can

prompt high-achieving, low-income students to apply to and enroll in more selective institutions. Their work underscores that even modest support, when well-designed, can reshape application behavior and improve match quality, particularly for students from underrepresented backgrounds. This gap between college aspirations and college going behavior reflects what Rosenbaum et al. (2006) describes as the college-for-all norm. While this norm promotes higher education as a universal goal, it often fails to provide equitable access to the knowledge and resources required to turn aspirations into outcomes. Many students are left navigating these processes alone, often in schools where counselors are overextended and parents may be unfamiliar with postsecondary systems (McDonough, 1997).

These studies illustrate that informational and procedural barriers are just as consequential as financial ones. While initiatives like Kansas Free Application Days reduce upfront costs, their impact can be magnified when paired with high-quality advising. Addressing procedural complexity through structured supports, particularly for students navigating the process without family guidance, remains essential for translating college aspirations into enrollment outcomes.

Role of School Counselors and College Access Professionals

The presence of a school counselor or other trusted adult is a critical factor in postsecondary access, with proactive, individualized advising shown to significantly increase application and enrollment rates—particularly for low-income, first generation, and underrepresented students (Bryan et al., 2011; Castleman & Page, 2014; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; McDonough, 2005; Perna et al., 2008; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). As primary sources of college information within schools, counselors and college access professionals serve as advocates, motivators, and logistical coordinators, guiding students through each step of the

application process. In the context of initiatives like Kansas Free Application Days, school counselors and college access professionals often serve as the cornerstone of implementation. They are responsible for disseminating information, coordinating logistics with postsecondary institutions, and providing one-on-one or group support to help students complete and submit applications. In schools with robust counseling infrastructure, these efforts translate into greater student participation and follow-through.

Systemic barriers often inhibit counselors' ability to fully support students. High student-to-counselor ratios across Kansas limit opportunities for individualized guidance, making it difficult to provide the sustained, personalized advising that college-bound students need (ASCA, 2019; KSDE, 2024). This disparity is particularly pronounced in rural and under-resourced districts, where counselors must juggle multiple responsibilities beyond college advising, including academic and mental health support (Woods & Domina, 2014). Additionally, the scope and depth of postsecondary advising in school counselor preparation programs vary widely. Many training programs lack a strong emphasis on college admissions, financial aid, and application strategies, which may leave even well-meaning counselors underprepared to meet the complex needs of students making college decisions (Perna et al., 2008; Savitz-Romer, 2012). As a result, students, especially those without college-educated family members, may miss out on essential support during critical decision-making periods. Despite these limitations, research consistently shows that when counselors can engage students early and intentionally, they can significantly improve application and enrollment outcomes. Bryan et al. (2011) found that early college-related counseling, particularly by 10th grade, was associated with applying to more colleges, especially for low-income students. This underscores the importance of timely and proactive advising structures.

Carey and Harrington (2010) found that schools with comprehensive counseling programs aligned to the ASCA National Model demonstrate stronger student academic achievement, college readiness, and postsecondary planning engagement. Using statewide data from over 250 high schools, they reported that students in fully implemented ASCA-aligned programs had higher test scores, better attendance, and greater participation in college and career planning than those in schools without such programs. These findings underscore the impact of counselors who have clearly defined roles, set goals, and use data-informed practices.

The ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2019) calls for school counselors to deliver comprehensive programs that promote students' academic, career, and social-emotional development, including college and career readiness through exposure to postsecondary planning, admissions processes, and financial aid systems. The ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success framework (ASCA, 2021) further specifies the attitudes, knowledge, and skills students need for college and career pathways, emphasizing the importance of equipping counselors with the training and resources to guide all students toward meaningful postsecondary goals.

Importantly, counselors influence more than just the procedural aspects of applying to college, they also shape student identities, aspirations, and self-belief. Oreopoulos and Dunn (2013) provide compelling evidence that encouragement from trusted adults, such as counselors, teachers, or mentors, and individualized support can significantly increase application rates. Their randomized controlled trial involved around 1,600 low-income high school students in Ontario, Canada, who were randomly assigned to receive an informational video about the costs of postsecondary education, earnings with postsecondary education, financial aid information, and application instructions (Oreopoulos & Dunn, 2013). The intervention group was

significantly more likely to attend postsecondary education compared to the control group. The Oreopoulos and Dunn (2013) study found that students who underestimated their academic abilities or overestimated college costs were more likely to submit applications after receiving more accurate information on costs and returns. This supports the broader concept of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), which highlights how aspirational and navigational capital help students from underrepresented backgrounds access postsecondary pathways.

As discussed earlier, one particularly effective strategy is providing students with hands-on, personalized support at key moments in the college process. Evidence from FAFSA interventions shows that even brief, targeted assistance can boost enrollment outcomes for low-income students (Bettinger et al., 2012). This underscores the broader value of counselor-led outreach during application season, not just for procedural help, but also for building student confidence and follow-through. Increasing access to trusted adults within the school is a critical component, as their encouragement can validate a student's potential and make college feel more attainable. When counselors actively endorse programs like application fee initiatives, they send a powerful message that college is not just for a select few, but an option available and appropriate for all students. This relational component is particularly impactful for students who might otherwise doubt their place in higher education (McKillip et al., 2012).

However, navigating the complexities of college preparation—including applications, standardized testing, FAFSA completion, and selecting the right institution—often demands more support than a single counselor can provide. Nationally, student-to-counselor ratios remain high, with the challenge particularly acute in high-poverty schools (NCES, 2024), constraining even the most dedicated counselors' ability to provide sustained, individualized guidance. This reality underscores the need for schoolwide collaboration, where college readiness is embraced

as a shared responsibility rather than left solely to counseling staff. When teachers, administrators, and support personnel collectively engage in postsecondary preparation efforts, students receive more consistent and equitable guidance throughout the process. Conversely, in schools with limited counseling capacity, the potential benefits of initiatives such as application fee waivers may be diminished due to the lack of available adult support (Castleman & Page, 2014).

Using a social capital framework, Bryan et al. (2011) found that early and repeated contact with school counselors was a strong predictor of applying to multiple colleges, especially for students with lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Bryan et al. (2011) also found that counselor interactions after 10th grade were sometimes associated with lower application rates among Black and Hispanic students, raising questions about the quality and cultural responsiveness of these advising encounters. Belasco (2013) reinforced the importance of early and equitable counseling. Drawing on data from more than 11,000 students in the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, Belasco (2013) used coarsened exact matching to minimize selection bias and compare outcomes between counseled and non-counseled students. After controlling for academic, demographic, and school-level variables, he found that counselor interaction had a statistically significant positive effect on four-year college enrollment, especially for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Students who received college-related guidance by 10th grade were much more likely to benefit from that interaction, underscoring the need for timely engagement. Belasco's (2013) work contributes rigorous causal evidence that targeted advising can help close postsecondary enrollment gaps.

In sum, school counselors and college access professionals are central to the success of initiatives like Kansas Free Application Days, influencing both the logistics of applying to

college and the aspirations that drive students to pursue higher education. Early, intentional, and culturally responsive advising—especially for low-income, first generation, and underrepresented students—has been shown to significantly improve application and enrollment outcomes (Belasco, 2013; Bryan et al., 2011; Carey & Harrington, 2010). However, high caseloads, limited training in postsecondary advising, and competing responsibilities often limit counselors’ capacity. Viewing college readiness as a shared schoolwide responsibility, supported by adequate resources and professional development, can strengthen counseling services and ensure access initiatives reach their full potential in expanding equitable pathways to higher education.

School-Based Campaigns

School-based college access interventions play a pivotal role in strategies aimed at increasing postsecondary access, especially those focused on influencing college application behavior. Becker’s (2018) research in CPS underscores how establishing formal requirements around college and financial aid applications can significantly increase postsecondary enrollment, particularly among low-income students. Such evidence highlights the power of institutionalizing support through clear expectations, accountability measures, and policy mandates rather than relying solely on encouragement.

Similarly, initiatives like Apply Kansas and the Kansas Free Application Days serve as system-level nudges by encouraging schools to host events, collaborate with colleges, and focus outreach efforts on students. These campaigns lower both tangible and perceived barriers by providing a time-bound window during which students are prompted and supported to act. The urgency created by these finite opportunities often motivates schools to organize in-person

application events, where counselors, educators, and volunteers provide real-time assistance to students.

Institutional reputation and active promotion also influence student application behavior. Alter and Reback (2014) note that when colleges publicly endorse and participate in free application initiatives, it signals to students that these institutions are welcoming and accessible, thereby positively shaping perceptions of affordability and fit. Effective school-based campaigns harness a broad coalition of stakeholders. Teachers may allocate class time for applications, college representatives offer onsite support, and community organizations contribute incentives or follow up services. When orchestrated well, the application process transforms from an individual burden into a collective accomplishment, especially important for students lacking adult support or feeling disconnected from a college going culture. However, implementation varies widely. While some schools develop comprehensive, inclusive campaigns with clear goals and robust resources, others merely participate nominally, providing limited guidance or promotion. Understanding this variability is critical for assessing the overall effectiveness of campaigns such as Kansas Free Application Days and for addressing equity gaps in service delivery.

Statewide and National Application Completion Initiatives

To combat persistent access gaps, states have implemented coordinated, large-scale efforts to increase college application rates. The ACAC is a prominent national organization who organizes an initiative designed to ensure that all high school seniors, especially those who are first generation, low-income, or underrepresented, receive the support and opportunity to submit at least one college application (ACT, 2025). In Kansas, this effort is known as Apply Kansas. In

2024, 253 of Kansas's 286 school districts participated in the Apply Kansas campaign (KBOR, 2025), facilitating school-based application completion events and support services.

Yet, as with many initiatives, implementation varies. Some schools host comprehensive, well-staffed events featuring counselors, teachers, college representatives, and community volunteers. These schools often integrate application assistance into advisory periods, reserve computer labs, and run schoolwide campaigns. Some events are aligned with free application initiatives, while others may not be. Conversely, schools in rural or under-resourced areas may lack the capacity, time, or awareness to organize such events. In these settings, students frequently navigate the application process independently, despite the presence of statewide campaigns. This uneven implementation raises significant equity concerns. While some students benefit from hands-on guidance, others continue to face persistent informational and motivational barriers. Hoxby and Avery (2013) found that even high-achieving, low-income students are unlikely to apply to selective colleges without personalized advising. Likewise, Roderick et al. (2011) emphasizes the critical role of college-savvy adults who can help students understand timelines, requirements, and institutional fit; key factors that transform college aspirations into enrollment.

Beyond short-term campaigns, federally funded programs provide sustained, holistic support designed to bridge gaps left by uneven local capacity. Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEARUP) and TRIO initiatives, including Upward Bound and Talent Search, offer multi-year services such as tutoring, mentoring, college exposure, financial aid guidance, and postsecondary planning, often beginning as early as middle school (National Council for Community and Education Partnerships [NCCEP], 2025; Perna & Swail, 2001). These programs frequently operate in districts with limited advising resources,

effectively expanding capacity and filling critical gaps. Unlike one-time events, these long-term programs demonstrate the value of continuous, embedded support that accompanies students through multiple college going phases, from early awareness through enrollment. Research shows that participants in GEAR UP and TRIO programs are more likely to apply to college, secure financial aid, and persist through their first postsecondary year (NCCEP, 2025; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Such sustained engagement complements and enhances the impact of short-term initiatives like fee waiver campaigns.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the literature on college access, progressing from broad themes to targeted barriers, interventions, and the policy context for this study. It began with framing postsecondary education as a public good, emphasizing both private and societal benefits but also the inequitable distribution of opportunity. The review then explored factors and forces shaping access, highlighting how financial resources, procedural complexity, academic preparation, and social and cultural supports intersect to either expand or constrain postsecondary pathways. Within this context, attention turned to the college choice process, guided by Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model and Bandura's (1986) SCT. Together, these perspectives explain how students' aspirations, searches, and choices are shaped by structural conditions, personal beliefs, and school-based supports. Research on college readiness and college knowledge demonstrated that access depends not only on academic preparation but also on procedural and social competencies that are inequitably distributed, particularly in under-resourced schools.

Research on the role of school counselors and advising underscored both their central influence on student outcomes and the systemic limitations that constrain their capacity. These

insights informed the review of school-based campaigns and state-led initiatives, which showed that structured interventions can increase application rates but vary in effectiveness depending on local implementation. The chapter also examined geographic access, highlighting how rural isolation, distance from campuses, and limited advising infrastructure compound inequities, particularly in states like Kansas. This provided the rationale for examining Kansas as a case where a statewide, coordinated approach to eliminating application fees creates a unique policy context for studying access.

Finally, the review synthesized evidence on financial, informational, and procedural strategies designed to increase application and enrollment. Across these strands, a consistent theme emerged: eliminating application fees alone is rarely sufficient, but when paired with strong advising and school-based support, such initiatives hold greater potential to expand opportunity and promote equity. From this research, the chapter refines the college access barriers introduced in Chapter 1 into a student-centered framework emphasizing three interrelated domains: financial access, college knowledge, and school-based advising. Together, these domains represent how financial, informational, psychological, and social barriers to college access are experienced and addressed within school contexts. This framework grounds the policy analysis case study that follows, which evaluates how Kansas Free Application Days influence student application behavior and counselor implementation across diverse school contexts.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used to investigate the influence of Kansas Free Application Days on students' postsecondary decision-making and to explore the role of school counselors in implementing and supporting this statewide initiative. A policy analysis case study design was chosen because it offered a robust framework for evaluating both the measurable outcomes and the contextual dynamics of policy implementation (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). By incorporating evidence from both student questionnaires and school counselor interviews, the design supported a comprehensive examination of how students and school counselors experience and respond to the initiative as a matter of state policy.

From a policy analysis perspective, data were collected from two primary sources: (1) student questionnaires, which captured the broad impact of the initiative on college application behavior and decision-making; and (2) structured counselor interviews that illuminated the practical realities of policy enactment in high schools, highlighting potential variation in implementation across rural, suburban, and urban contexts. Collectively, the data examined both policy outcomes and processes, yielding insights not only into whether the initiative works but also how and under what conditions it achieves its effects (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

Case study methodology is particularly appropriate for policy analysis of educational initiatives, as it situates the investigation within the complexity of real-world contexts and allows for nuanced interpretation of policy dynamics (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). By centering Kansas as the case, the study examined how a statewide policy currently in the pilot phase operated across diverse local environments. This policy analysis case study provided evidence on the capacity of Kansas Free Application Days to reduce barriers, promote equity, and shape college access

efforts, offering implications for both state-level decision makers and broader conversations about higher education access policy.

The chapter begins with the purpose of the study and the research questions. It then outlines the policy analysis case study design, including the rationale for a multi-site approach and justification for the selected data sources. Subsequent sections describe the population and sample, site selection procedures, and demographic characteristics of the participating schools. The chapter also details the data collection procedures, including the development and administration of the student questionnaire and the structured interview protocol for school counselors. Finally, the chapter explains the data analysis and integration processes, strategies used to establish trustworthiness, considerations related to researcher subjectivity and protection of human subjects, and the limitations of the study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this policy analysis case study was to examine how Kansas Free Application Days influence students' college application behaviors and decision-making, while also exploring the role school counselors play in implementing and supporting the initiative. This study sought to understand whether initiatives that remove application fees reduce barriers to postsecondary education or simply shift student choices among institutions. Using student questionnaire data alongside counselor interview insights, the study provided a multi-dimensional understanding of the campaign's impact on access, equity, and institutional practices.

Research Questions

The overarching research question guiding this study was:

How do Free Application Campaigns influence students' decisions to apply to college?

To address this overarching question, the following sub-questions were explored:

Sub-RQ1. What factors influence students' decisions to participate in the Kansas Free Application Days?

Sub-RQ2. How do school counselors' approaches to Free Application Days inform recommendations for college access policies and practices?

Policy Analysis Case Study Design

A case study is defined as the in-depth investigation of a bounded system, such as a program, policy, or campaign, within its real-life context (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). It is particularly suited to research questions that ask how and why phenomena unfold in specific educational settings where descriptive data cannot be separated from the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2018). The study asked how the campaign influences student application decisions, the barriers shaping participation (sub-RQ1), and counselor-informed strategies for strengthening the initiative (sub-RQ2) which aligns with the scope case study methodology is best suited for. Also, this study examined Kansas Free Application Days, a bounded state policy initiative, as its case. The case was defined as the statewide campaign, as it is implemented across Kansas public high schools. There were two units of analysis: (1) the individual student's application decision-making process, and (2) the school counselor's implementation practices and recommendations. Such designations of the units of analysis reflected both individual-level and institutional-level dimensions of the campaign, offering a holistic exploration of how the Kansas Free Application Days operates across contexts.

Multi-Site Rationale and Implications

Since the Kansas Free Application Days is a statewide initiative, the case study was designed as a multi-site study, drawing on three schools representing diverse NCES (2024)

locale codes: City–Large, Town–Fringe, and Rural–Remote, which align respectively with urban, suburban, and rural community contexts. This multi-site approach was essential for understanding how geographic and socioeconomic variations influence both student decisions and counselor practices. Including schools across urban, suburban, and rural settings allowed the study to identify cross-cutting themes tied to each research question including barriers to participation (sub-RQ1) and counselor-informed recommendations (sub-RQ2), while also recognizing context-specific challenges. The implications of this multi-site design are twofold: first, it enhanced transferability by demonstrating how the Kansas Free Application Days unfolded across diverse contexts; second, it highlighted whether equity-related barriers, such as geographic access or counseling capacity, shape differential impacts of the campaign in relation to the overarching research question.

Justification for Data Sources

The research questions guiding this study required both descriptive numeric data and contextual narrative data. The student questionnaire addressed the overarching research question and sub-RQ1 by capturing large-scale, measurable outcomes related to application behavior, barriers, and other influences on decision-making. Meanwhile, structured interviews with school counselors provided contextual and institutional perspectives, surfacing school-level practices, and capturing counselors' individual interpretations of how students engaged with the initiative. These interviews also generated recommendations for strengthening the campaign. Using only one method would have left the analysis incomplete: the questionnaire alone would not explain why students made certain choices, while interviews alone would not provide evidence of how widely certain patterns occurred. Combining methods strengthened explanatory power, meaning the integration of data sources allowed the study to more fully explain both the patterns observed

in student responses and the contextual factors shaping those patterns. The use of multiple sources also supported triangulation, which involves comparing and corroborating findings across different types of data to enhance credibility and confidence in the results. Finally, the design enabled complementarity, whereby each data source contributed distinct but related insights, allowing the strengths of one method to elaborate or clarify findings from the other (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2018). Table 3.1 presents the alignment of research questions with the data collection methods.

Table 3.1

Alignment of Research Questions with Data Collection Methods

Research Question	Student Questionnaire	Counseling Staff Interviews
How do Free Application Campaigns influence students' decisions to apply to college?	✓	✓
Sub-RQ1. What factors influence students' decisions to participate in the Kansas Free Application Days?	✓	✓
Sub-RQ2. How do school counselors' approaches to Free Application Days inform recommendations for college access policies and practices?		✓

Data Integration Strategy

This study used both a student questionnaire and structured interviews with school counselors, collected during the same policy window of the 2025 Kansas Free Application Days. Each data source was analyzed independently and then interpreted together to provide a comprehensive account of the initiative's impact. Student responses offered broad patterns of

application behavior and perceived barriers, while counselor interviews provided contextual and interpretive insights about implementation, advising structures, and school capacity.

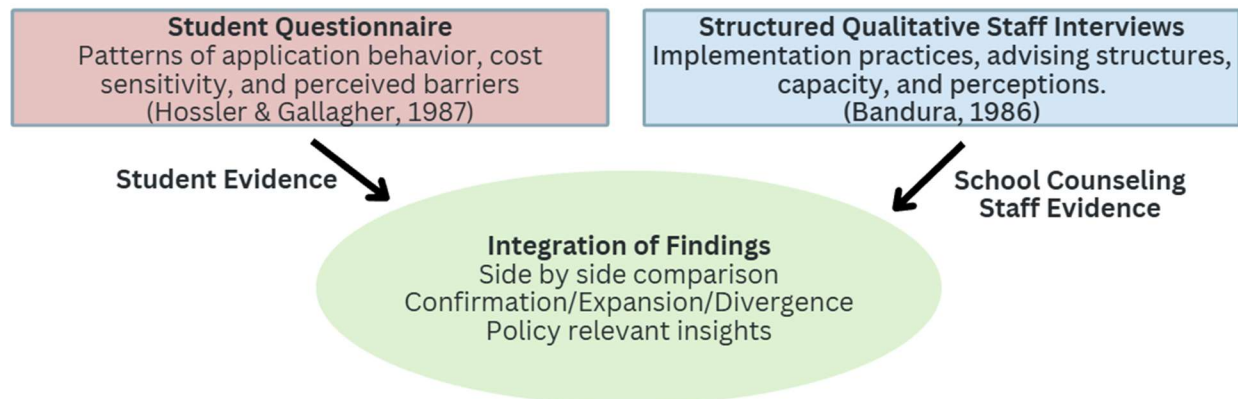
Integration was conducted through a side-by-side comparison that arrayed questionnaire indicators next to qualitative themes for each research question. This approach highlighted areas of confirmation, expansion, and divergence. For example, questionnaire estimates of the salience of application fees and other barriers were compared with counselor narratives about observed hesitation, engagement, and participation. Likewise, student-reported application behaviors were juxtaposed with counselor accounts of how school-level supports, timing of interventions, and counseling resources influenced decisions. Counselor recommendations were examined against student experiences to assess both feasibility and impact.

The student questionnaire was interpreted through Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model, which conceptualizes predisposition, search, and choice in the college going process. Counselor interviews were interpreted through Bandura's (1986) SCT, which emphasizes triadic reciprocal causation between personal factors, behaviors, and environmental influences. During integration, evidence about barriers and decision-making from students was aligned with counselor reports to clarify how advising structures and campaign logistics affected students across the three phases. This framework-anchored process supported coherent interpretations about whether the campaign reduced barriers or primarily redirected applications across institutions (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). This integration process enhanced interpretive validity and produced policy-relevant insights into the operation and impact of statewide fee waiver campaigns in varied Kansas contexts. Figure 3.1 provides a visual representation of the data integration strategy used in this policy analysis case study, illustrating how student questionnaire data and counselor interview findings were

analyzed independently and then integrated across research questions to inform interpretations of policy impact and equity.

Figure 3.1

Policy Analysis Case Study Design Data Integration



Population and Sample

Having established the theoretical and methodological framework, the next step was to identify participants whose experiences would generate the data necessary to answer the research questions. To ensure comprehensive coverage of perspectives, this study drew on data from two key stakeholder groups: high school seniors and school counseling staff. The study population included students attending Kansas public high schools who participated in the 2025 Free Application Days campaign, as well as school counseling staff from those same high schools who were actively involved in implementing the initiative within their schools. Examining both students and counselors provided a more holistic view of the campaign's influence, supporting the case study's focus on how the policy was experienced by students and implemented by high schools (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2018).

Site Selection

A convenience sampling approach was used to select three high schools that were accessible and willing to participate, while applying maximum variation principles to ensure diversity in size, geographic location spanning Kansas, and socioeconomic status (Blackstone, 2018; Patton, 2015). Schools were stratified using NCES (2024) locale classifications and KSDE (2025) free and reduced price lunch rates to reflect variation across educational contexts. The three participating schools represented distinct locales: one City – Large (urban), one Town – Fringe (suburban), and one Rural – Remote (rural). The urban and suburban sites were selected first from different regions of the state to avoid geographic clustering and to capture variation in student population size and advising structures. Once these sites were secured, the rural site was intentionally selected from a separate region and positioned at an approximately equal distance from both the urban and suburban schools to reduce regional proximity effects and ensure a distinct community context.

In addition to geographic and socioeconomic considerations, school size and school counseling staff years in the profession and availability were factored into site selection. Schools varied by enrollment with participating school counseling staff having over five years of professional experience and direct involvement in overseeing college and career readiness initiatives such as college application support. These criteria ensured that selected schools could provide both student perspectives and counselor insights grounded in meaningful variation of advising capacity and institutional context. These factors created a sample that captured distinct demographic conditions, community contexts, and advising structures, thereby strengthening the transferability of findings across Kansas's educational landscape (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2018).

Student Questionnaire – High School Seniors

The student questionnaire targeted high school seniors from Kansas public schools after the 2025 Kansas Free Application Days, held in October. A convenience sampling approach was used, drawing on schools that were accessible and willing to participate, guided by geographic context and socioeconomic status (Blackstone, 2018; Patton, 2015). Schools were stratified by both geographic context and socioeconomic status, measured by free and reduced price lunch rates provided by KSDE (KSDE, 2025). Inclusion criteria required that participants be enrolled as seniors in one of the selected Kansas public high schools and eligible to participate in Kansas Free Application Days, consistent with best practices in educational research (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Exclusion criteria included underclassmen or students not attending the selected schools, as they would not have had the opportunity to participate in the campaign and would lack awareness (Dillman et al., 2014). A total of three schools were selected, one representing each NCES locale classification: City – Large, Town – Fringe, and Rural – Remote (NCES, 2024). This convenience-based structure was informed by maximum variation principles, ensuring meaningful diversity across school size, demographics, and advising capacity, thereby enhancing the transferability of findings across educational contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2018). Recruitment procedures involved partnering with school counselors at each selected high school, who distributed the questionnaire to seniors using a secure Qualtrics link. The questionnaire remained open for three weeks, with reminder messages sent by counselors each week to encourage participation. This procedure followed best practices for increasing response rates in school-based questionnaires while ensuring voluntary participation and adherence to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Dillman et al., 2014).

Qualitative Interviews – School Counselors

For the structured interviews, the study employed convenience sampling strategy to recruit three school counselors from schools that were accessible and willing to participate, each representing one of the selected school settings (urban, suburban, and rural). This approach reflects established guidance in qualitative case study methodology, which emphasizes selecting participants based on their ability to provide relevant, experience-based insights (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Stake, 1995). Counselors were chosen because they coordinated Free Application Day activities in their schools and could provide insight into implementation strategies, barriers, and student engagement. This aligns with case study methodology, which prioritizes participants who can provide detailed accounts of policy enactment within institutional contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Stake, 1995).

Inclusion criteria required that school counseling staff possess at least five years of professional experience in their role and have been directly involved in implementing the 2025 Kansas Free Application Days campaign. This threshold was intentional, as counselors with a minimum of five years' experience have developed a command of advising practices, cultivated relationships with students and families, and earned credibility within their schools and communities. Their tenure reflects both institutional and community buy-in, positioning them as key actors who influence how policies such as Free Application Days are carried out at the local level. Experienced counselors bring a depth of knowledge about advising structures, systemic barriers, and student decision-making patterns that are essential for interpreting the reach and impact of the initiative. Their voices are particularly necessary because they can contextualize the campaign within broader advising practices and reflect on how such interventions intersect with longstanding challenges and opportunities in college access. Requiring direct involvement

in implementing Free Application Days ensured that participants could speak to the initiative's specific processes and outcomes, which is consistent with convenience sampling approaches where participants are selected based on availability and direct relevance to the research focus (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Recruitment procedures involved inviting the most appropriate counseling staff from each of the three selected schools to participate in structured interviews. In this study, structured interviews are defined as those in which the wording and order of questions are predetermined to ensure consistency across participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2015). Although questions were pre-determined, they were phrased in an open-ended manner so that counselors could elaborate on their experiences within the defined categories of inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Invitations were sent via email, and consent was obtained prior to participation (see Appendix A). Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom, lasted approximately 45 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed with participant permission. This design aligns with qualitative interview standards where structured protocols are used deductively to generate comparable data while still capturing participants' reflections (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2015). The unit of analysis for this component was the individual counseling staff within their institutional context, allowing for comparisons across school types (Yin, 2018).

Demographic and Geographic Characteristics of Sites

Schools were selected through convenience sampling, drawing on sites that were accessible and willing to participate, while still guided by criteria including school size, geographic location, socioeconomic status as measured by free and reduced price lunch rates, and years of professional experience of the counseling staff involved in implementing the Kansas

Free Application Days campaign (Blackstone, 2018; KSDE, 2025). These criteria ensured that the three sites reflected meaningful variation in advising structures and community conditions across Kansas. According to NCES locale classifications, the high school representing the urban sector is classified as City – Large; the suburban site is classified as Town – Fringe; and the rural site is classified as Rural – Remote (NCES, 2024). Each setting differed substantially in student enrollment, counselor-to-student ratios, and available postsecondary advising resources, offering valuable contrasts for the study.

Socioeconomic differences were reflected in the percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced price lunch, with the urban site serving a more economically diverse population, the suburban site reflecting a mid-range socioeconomic profile, and the rural site reporting higher levels of economic need. These differences highlight variation in institutional capacity, as rural schools often face limited staffing and fewer external partnerships compared to larger suburban or urban counterparts. Counseling staff at the selected schools also varied in experience and advising structures. While all participating counseling staff had at least five years of professional experience, the size of their caseloads and the organizational structures for implementing Free Application Days differed across sites. In the urban school, larger counseling teams allowed for distribution of responsibilities, whereas the rural site relied on one staff with broader responsibilities. The suburban site reflected a middle ground, offering insights into how advising capacity and school size intersect. As shown in Table 3.2, the combination of locale codes, enrollment sizes, and socioeconomic indicators demonstrates how the three schools captured a spectrum of demographic and geographic conditions. This variation provided the study with a robust basis for examining how students and counselors in different contexts experienced Kansas Free Application Days and contributed to the transferability of findings

across the state (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2018).

Table 3.2

Demographic and Geographic Characteristics of Selected Kansas High Schools

School Setting	NCES Locale Code	Free & Reduced Lunch	Senior Class Size	School Counselor to Student Ratio
Urban	11 (City – Large)	78%	540-560	1:1,200
Suburban	31 (Town – Fringe)	18%	250-270	1:350
Rural	43 (Rural – Remote)	46%	50-70	1:240

Data Collection Procedures

The procedures for collecting data in this study were intentionally structured to support the policy analysis case study design and to capture both student and counselor perspectives on the initiative. Data collection included multiple interrelated components: the design and refinements of instruments, administration of a student questionnaire, development of a structured interview protocol, pilot testing, and full data collection. Instrumentation emphasized alignment with research questions, content relevance, and clarity. Questionnaire items were adapted from prior research and reviewed by experts to establish content and face validity, and interview questions were grounded in established conceptual frameworks. The student questionnaire provided descriptive data of student awareness, participation, and decision-making related to Kansas Free Application Days, while the interview protocol elicited qualitative insights from school counselors regarding implementation practices and perceived impact. A pilot study was conducted to refine the student questionnaire prior to large-scale administration, improving clarity and usability. Finally, data collection occurred with the questionnaire distributed electronically to high school seniors and counselor interviews conducted via Zoom,

ensuring that both groups' perspectives were captured during the same implementation period. Together, these procedures ensured methodological rigor, ethical compliance, and the collection of complementary data sources that allowed for a multi-perspective analysis of the policy (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Yin, 2018).

Instrumentation

To investigate the impact of Kansas Free Application Days on student decision-making and institutional practices, this study employed two primary instruments: a student questionnaire and a structured interview protocol (Patton, 2015) for school counselors. These tools were purposefully designed to align with the case study policy analysis framework, ensuring the collection of both student- and counselor-level insights. The student questionnaire was developed to measure key factors influencing students' college application behaviors, such as awareness of the campaign, financial concerns, motivation to apply, and perceived barriers to postsecondary access. Items were informed by existing literature and underwent expert review to establish content and face validity. A pilot administration was used to refine clarity, flow, and usability.

The counselor interview protocol was designed to elicit rich, contextual data on the implementation of Free Application Days at the school level. It focused on counselor strategies, student engagement, and perceived outcomes of the campaign, offering critical insight into the support structures that shaped students' application experiences. Together, these instruments provided complementary data sources that illuminated both student experiences and institutional practices, enhancing the credibility of findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2018). The subsections below describe the development, structure, and validation of each instrument used in this study.

Student Questionnaire

The student questionnaire was developed to assess how Kansas Free Application Days influenced students' college application decisions. It included multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and demographic items. The items were organized into several thematic sections that addressed student awareness, motivation to apply, reasons for participation, perceived financial barriers, college application process barriers, and influence on enrollment. Items were adapted from prior research on college access and nudging interventions (for example, Castleman and Page, 2015; Hoxby and Turner, 2013). The decision to use a questionnaire was intentional, as it provided a structured and efficient means of capturing broad patterns across a diverse group of students while still allowing for depth in areas such as perceptions of financial and procedural barriers. To strengthen contextual relevance, the questionnaire was adapted from the reporting structure used in the ACT's ACAC data collection. Kansas high schools already participate in ACAC reporting through KBOR's Apply Kansas initiative, making this format familiar to school personnel and senior students. Aligning the instrument with this existing statewide process allowed for consistency in how application behaviors were documented and supported accurate student self-reporting.

A panel of education professionals representing both higher education and secondary schools reviewed the questionnaire to establish content and face validity. Feedback from this group informed minor revisions to item wording and questionnaire design before full implementation. A pilot administration with 61 high school students assessed clarity, logical flow, and ease of completion. Feedback from the pilot indicated the importance of using language that students clearly understand, defining terms that may be unfamiliar such as first generation college student, and organizing the questionnaire so that the most pertinent questions

appeared first. The pilot also highlighted the need to ensure that the sequence of questions followed a logical progression that made sense to students. The questionnaire generated descriptive insights into students' participation, perceived barriers, and the extent to which Free Application Days influenced their application behaviors. By capturing students' voices directly, the instrument provided data that are often absent from administrative collections and contributed to a more complete understanding of how policy interventions shape college access.

Interview Protocol

A structured interview (Patton, 2015) protocol (see Appendix C) guided conversations with school counselors to ensure consistency in both the wording and order of questions, reflecting a deductive approach aligned with predetermined categories of inquiry. Questions focused on how counselors promoted and facilitated Free Application Days, what strategies they used to engage students, what barriers students encountered during the application process, and how the initiative influenced students' postsecondary planning. Although the interviews were structured, the open-ended question format encouraged participants to reflect on their practices and experiences in context. Interview questions were informed by literature related to postsecondary advising, equity in access, and college and career readiness components.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted in early spring 2025 to assess the clarity, usability, and feasibility of the student questionnaire and to refine data collection procedures prior to full implementation. Three high school sites were selected based on student population size, using Kansas State High School Activities Association (KSHSAA) classifications as part of the selection process (KSHSAA, 2025). From those schools, all three school counseling staff participated in structured interviews, and two also facilitated the student questionnaire pilot. The

third school did not participate in the student questionnaire pilot due to timing constraints in the administration schedule. To protect participants and encourage candid responses, school sites remain anonymous. Although the school counselor interviews were originally conceptualized as semi-structured, the interview process followed a more structured design, with predetermined wording and order of questions. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, allowing sufficient time for school counseling staff to provide detailed responses while maintaining consistency in administration.

School counseling staff distributed the questionnaire electronically to students who had participated in Kansas Free Application Days in October 2024. A total of 61 students responded, with 60 complete questionnaires included in the analysis. Feedback from students and school counseling staff was used to refine item wording, layout, and sequencing. This process also underscored the importance of capturing additional demographic indicators, such as free and reduced price lunch rates, and highlighted the need to ground site selection in nationally recognized frameworks for school size and locale to strengthen credibility. It was also learned that larger schools may employ additional staff within the school counseling office who, while not Kansas-endorsed school counselors, often take the lead in college and career readiness initiatives and advising efforts across the school. Recognizing these varied staffing structures further informed site selection considerations and the design of the full study. Finally, the pilot underscored the importance of capturing perspectives from all students, including those who did not participate in the Free Application Days, to better understand reasons for nonparticipation and barriers that may persist. Collectively, findings from the pilot study confirmed the feasibility of school-based electronic distribution, strengthened instrument clarity, and informed site selection and staffing considerations for the full study.

Data Collection

Following pilot refinement, full data collection was conducted during the 2025 Kansas Free Application Days implementation period. For this case study, data collection occurred during the same time period for both the student questionnaire and counselor interviews, ensuring that the information reflected real-time experiences of the 2025 Kansas Free Application Days initiative. This concurrent approach supported comparison of student and counselor perspectives within the same policy cycle. The following subsections detail the procedures used to administer the questionnaire and conduct the interviews, including timelines, participant recruitment, consent protocols, and data handling practices to ensure ethical alignment and data integrity.

Student Questionnaire Data Collection

The student questionnaire shown in Appendix B was administered electronically using Qualtrics shortly after the 2025 Kansas Free Application Days campaign. School counselors from participating high schools were invited to distribute the questionnaire to their senior students. The questionnaire was open for three weeks, and reminders were given to students by their school counselors after each week to encourage responses. The questionnaire captured students' awareness of Kansas Free Application Days, participation in the campaign, motivations for applying to college, perceived barriers to application, and demographic characteristics. No identifying information was collected. Parent consent processes varied by district and influenced participation rates, particularly in the urban and suburban sites, where counselors reported challenges obtaining timely parent responses despite multiple reminders. All data was stored in compliance with IRB guidelines.

Qualitative Data Collection

Structured qualitative interviews were conducted through Zoom with three school counseling staff members who support students with college and career readiness, each representing a distinct school context across Kansas. These interviews were designed to provide contextual understanding of implementation strategies, student engagement, and school-level support. Participants were purposefully selected to reflect variation in geographic location, school size, and student demographics using NCES (2024) locale classifications: City–Large, Town–Fringe, and Rural–Remote. The rural site employed a single school counselor serving approximately 240 students, with responsibilities spanning academic advising, social-emotional support, and postsecondary planning. The suburban site reflected a counselor-to-student ratio of approximately 1:350, with counselors balancing college and career advising alongside broader responsibilities. The urban site employed multiple counselors with average caseloads of approximately 1:500 students; however, the participant interviewed for this study specialized in college and career readiness and directly supported approximately 1,200 juniors and seniors.

These contextual differences shaped how Kansas Free Application Days was implemented across sites. In the urban school, a high proportion of students qualified for free and reduced lunch and were already eligible for need-based fee waivers throughout the year. As a result, the campaign functioned less as a fee-removal intervention and more as a coordinated, visible opportunity to promote postsecondary planning at scale. In contrast, counselors in the rural and suburban sites described Kansas Free Application Days as a unique mechanism for reducing financial and procedural barriers for students. Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom, lasted approximately 45 minutes, and followed a structured interview protocol. Participants received a digital consent form in advance and reaffirmed consent at the beginning

of each session. Data collection occurred after the conclusion of the campaign, allowing counselors to reflect on implementation strategies, student engagement, and perceived impact during the most recent cycle.

Data Analysis and Management

To address the research questions guiding this policy analysis case study, both the student questionnaire and structured interview data were managed and analyzed using procedures appropriate to their respective forms and consistent with the case study methodology. The data analysis process were guided by the policy analysis case study design and aligned with the study's theoretical frameworks, with each data source analyzed separately and then integrated to develop a comprehensive understanding.

For the student questionnaire, responses were exported from Qualtrics into Excel for cleaning and analysis. Data cleaning involved checking for incomplete responses and verifying accurate coding of descriptive data. The dataset was stored in a secure, password-protected digital environment in compliance with IRB protocols. The structured interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded using Zoom's built-in recording feature. Audio recordings were stored in a secure, encrypted folder accessible only to the researcher. Each interview was transcribed verbatim using a combination of Zoom's automated transcription and manual review to ensure accuracy. Transcripts were de-identified to protect participant confidentiality, with pseudonyms replacing names of individuals and schools.

Qualitative analysis was conducted through a researcher-driven coding process. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and final reporting. This process allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and provided insight into how school counseling staff

experienced and implemented the Kansas Free Application Days campaign. Themes were then compared across the three school settings to highlight variations in implementation and contextual influences, further enhancing the explanatory depth of the analysis.

Student Questionnaire Data Analysis

Data from the student questionnaire was analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques to identify patterns in student participation, decision-making, and perceptions related to Kansas Free Application Days. The analysis was guided by Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model of college choice—predisposition, search, and choice—which framed how students' decision-making processes were shaped by the campaign. This framework supported interpretation of how financial awareness, access to information, and perceived self-efficacy influenced students' participation in the initiative.

The parent consent process created a significant barrier to questionnaire completion. The urban and suburban school reported barriers to parent responsiveness, limiting participation despite reminders from counseling staff. A total of 158 questionnaires were opened, with 141 fully completed and included in the final dataset. Data frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical items such as student participation, awareness of the campaign, reasons for applying, and perceived barriers. Measures of central tendency were reported for Likert-scale items capturing student perceptions of the extent to which the campaign reduced barriers and the impact of the free application days. Cross-tabulations of select variables were generated to provide additional descriptive comparisons across student populations. This descriptive analytic approach aligns with Patton's (2015) emphasis on selecting analytic strategies that are responsive to the purpose of the study and the type of data collected, allowing for policy-relevant insights without making inferential claims beyond the sampled schools (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin,

2018). Following data cleaning, school identifiers were removed and replaced with urban, suburban, and rural designations to protect confidentiality and enable cross-context comparisons.

Analysis focused on identifying how Kansas Free Application Days affected students' motivation to apply to college, their access to information and guidance during the application process, and their decisions regarding where and how many institutions to apply to. Comparative analyses were conducted across the three school contexts to identify both shared and context-specific influences on student participation. These comparisons provided insight into local factors that shaped how students engaged with the initiative.

Qualitative Analysis

Data from school counselor interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, practices, and perceptions related to the implementation of the Kansas Free Application Days. This deductive, a priori coding approach structured the analysis around the predetermined phases of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) college choice model, ensuring that coding categories were theoretically grounded while still allowing for contextual nuance (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Following data collection, interviews were analyzed using a coding framework derived from the theoretical model. Subthemes were identified within each phase to capture variations in counselor practices and student experiences.

All coding and analysis were conducted manually. The researcher created an initial codebook aligned with the theoretical framework and applied these codes systematically to each transcript. Additional codes were added as patterns emerged, and analytic memos were used throughout the process to document reflections, coding decisions, and developing interpretations. Comparing codes across transcripts supported the identification of relationships and distinctions across school contexts. Confirmability was addressed through ongoing peer debriefing and

researcher reflexivity, which helped ensure that interpretations were grounded in participant perspectives rather than researcher assumptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Integration of Data Sources

This case study integrated findings from both the student questionnaire and counselor interviews to produce a comprehensive understanding of how Kansas Free Application Days functioned as a policy initiative. The questionnaire data provided breadth by highlighting patterns of awareness, participation, and application behaviors among seniors across three distinct school contexts. The counselor interviews, in turn, offered depth by uncovering the strategies, challenges, and contextual factors that shaped how the initiative was implemented at the school level. Analyzing these sources together allowed for connections between student-reported experiences and the practices of counselors, strengthening the validity of interpretations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2018). The complementary insights created a more nuanced picture of the campaign's influence, aligning with case study methodology that values multiple sources of evidence to enhance analytic rigor (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2018).

Trustworthiness

To ensure the structured interviews were conducted with rigor, this study incorporated strategies aligned with Tracy's (2010) "Big Tent" criteria. Multiple strategies were employed to establish credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. For the student questionnaire, credibility was enhanced through careful alignment of questionnaire items with the study's purpose, pilot testing for clarity, and systematic data cleaning procedures to ensure accuracy and consistency of responses. For the school counselor interviews, credibility was supported through triangulation with student data, brief debriefings following each interview to

clarify the study's purpose and invite additional reflections, and member checking in which participants were provided with summaries of their responses and preliminary themes to verify accuracy and representation. In addition, credibility was reinforced through intentional alignment of interview questions with the research questions (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

Dependability was supported through the maintenance of an audit trail documenting coding decisions, analytic memos, and procedural steps taken throughout data collection and analysis. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing, which helped mitigate bias and maintain focus on participant perspectives. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of participant contexts, including details about school setting, size, and socioeconomic characteristics, enabling readers to determine the relevance of findings to other contexts. For the student questionnaire, direct member checking was not feasible due to the anonymous distribution of responses; however, the pilot study functioned as a form of pre-validation, with feedback from students and counselors used to refine item clarity and flow. These measures ensured that the qualitative findings accurately represented participants' experiences and were grounded in transparent and ethical research practices.

Research Subjectivity

As a former school counselor with nearly two decades of experience supporting students in college and career readiness, along with my previous role in Academic Affairs at KBOR, I brought both practitioner and policy-level perspectives to this research. My professional work had centered on expanding postsecondary access and equity, particularly for students who faced financial or informational barriers to college. These experiences directly informed my motivation for examining the effectiveness and equity implications of the Kansas Free Application Days initiative. My personal background also shaped my perspective. I was raised in rural Kansas

where my family experienced financial hardship. As a first generation college student who was full Pell grant eligible, I personally encountered barriers to higher education access, including uncertainty about the cost of applying to college and lack of awareness about fee waivers. Despite financial need, I did not know such support existed, an experience that reflects broader issues of stigma and information gaps faced by many students. These lived experiences inevitably influenced how I framed research questions, interpreted findings, and interacted with participants. While they helped me understand the challenges students and counselors may have faced, I recognized that my perspective is shaped by my racial identity, rural upbringing, and particular educational pathway. I remained critically aware that my positionality does not reflect the full range of identities or experiences, especially those of students from racially minoritized or linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Throughout the research process, I practiced ongoing reflexivity by journaling, consulting with peers, and engaging in regular critical reflection about my assumptions and biases. This approach was essential to ensure that data collection, analysis, and interpretation centered participant voices rather than my own. My goal was to elevate the perspectives of counselors and students within their specific contexts and to contribute to a more equitable understanding of how college access campaigns functioned across diverse settings. By acknowledging my subjectivity, I strove to enhance the trustworthiness, transparency, and ethical rigor of this study.

Protection of Human Subjects

All procedures for this study received were approved by the Kansas State University IRB. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Student participants were presented with an electronic consent form before beginning the questionnaire. Only consenting students were allowed to

proceed. Counselor participants signed an informed consent form and verbally affirmed consent at the beginning of each interview. To protect confidentiality, all names of participants, schools, and districts were replaced with pseudonyms, and any potentially identifying information was removed from transcripts, notes, and reports. All responses were de-identified and stored in secure, password-protected digital environments. Research records will be retained for three years following the completion of the study, after which all digital files will be permanently deleted, and any physical materials will be securely destroyed in accordance with IRB requirements.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the convenience sampling approach for both the student questionnaire and counselor interviews limits the generalizability of findings. Second, self-reported data in the questionnaire may be influenced by bias or incomplete recall. Third, my previous affiliation with KBOR presents potential for bias; however, reflexivity practices were employed to mitigate undue influence. In addition, there is no direct or accurate way to determine a student's low-income status based on the data collected in this study. While the questionnaire included demographic indicators such as first generation status and school size, it did not collect income data or use proxies such as free and reduced price lunch eligibility. This limits the ability to analyze how the Free Application Days impacted economically disadvantaged students specifically, despite the central importance to access-focused initiatives.

Although this study employed a researcher-developed questionnaire, districts treated the instrument as a survey and applied the requirements of Kansas Statute § 72-6316 (2025), which affected participation rates. The statute requires school districts to obtain prior written parental consent for any survey that includes questions related to certain protected topics, including

political or religious beliefs, mental health, or family relationships. Although the questionnaire in this study did not include sensitive content, districts interpreted the legislation conservatively, resulting in hesitation or delay in the questionnaire approval and distribution process. This external factor may have influenced response rates and should be considered when interpreting the study's findings. Additional limitations relate to the scope and context of participating sites. Three high schools were included in the qualitative portion of the study, selected intentionally to represent rural, suburban, and urban contexts. While this purposeful sampling strategy supported cross context comparison, it also limits broader generalization to all Kansas districts.

Summary

This chapter detailed the methodological framework used to investigate the impact of Kansas Free Application Days on student college application behaviors and counselor implementation practices. A case study design was employed to capture both measurable student outcomes and contextual insights from school counselors, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the initiative within its real-world setting. The student questionnaire, guided by Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase college choice model, analyzed how predisposition, search, and choice processes influenced application behaviors. The school counselor interviews, framed by Bandura's (1986) SCT, explored how environmental supports, student self-efficacy, and perceptions shaped participation. By integrating these frameworks, the study connected students' self-efficacy, influences, and decision-making processes with institutional practices.

Data collection and analysis were structured to ensure both breadth and depth, with triangulation and equal attention to multiple sources strengthening the validity of findings. Convenience site selection across three diverse school contexts (urban, suburban, and rural) highlighted how geographic and socioeconomic variation shaped implementation and outcomes.

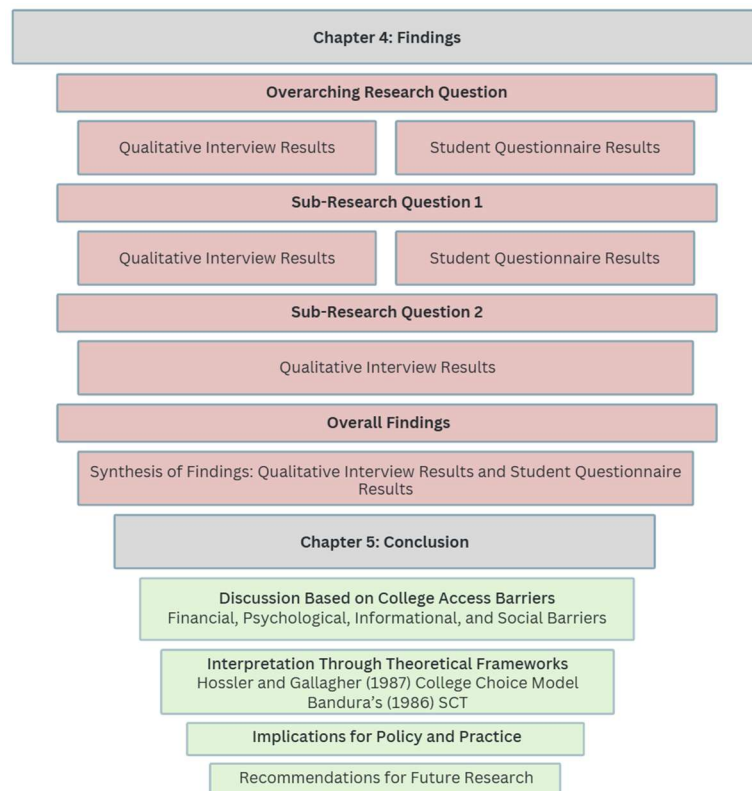
Ethical safeguards, reflexivity, and trustworthiness strategies further supported methodological rigor. Through the integration of student and counselor perspectives, this chapter established the foundation for producing nuanced, policy-relevant insights.

Chapter 4 - Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the policy analysis case study examining how the Kansas Free Application Days initiative influenced students' postsecondary decision-making and how school counseling staff implemented and supported the campaign across diverse educational settings. Findings are organized by research question, followed by a set of seven integrated findings that synthesize patterns across data sources and school contexts. Figure 4.1 provides a visual overview of how findings are organized across Chapter 4 and how they transition into the discussion in Chapter 5. The figure illustrates how analyses move from the overarching research question and sub-research questions, through strand-specific results, to integrated findings that inform the barrier-based discussion and theoretical interpretation that follow. The seven integrated findings are presented individually to highlight distinct but interrelated influences, including financial and procedural barriers, counselor support, campaign structure and timing, application behavior, local implementation conditions, and equity considerations. Together, these findings establish the foundation for the synthesis and policy-relevant discussion presented in the concluding chapter.

Figure 4.1

Analytic Progression from Findings to Interpretation and Implications

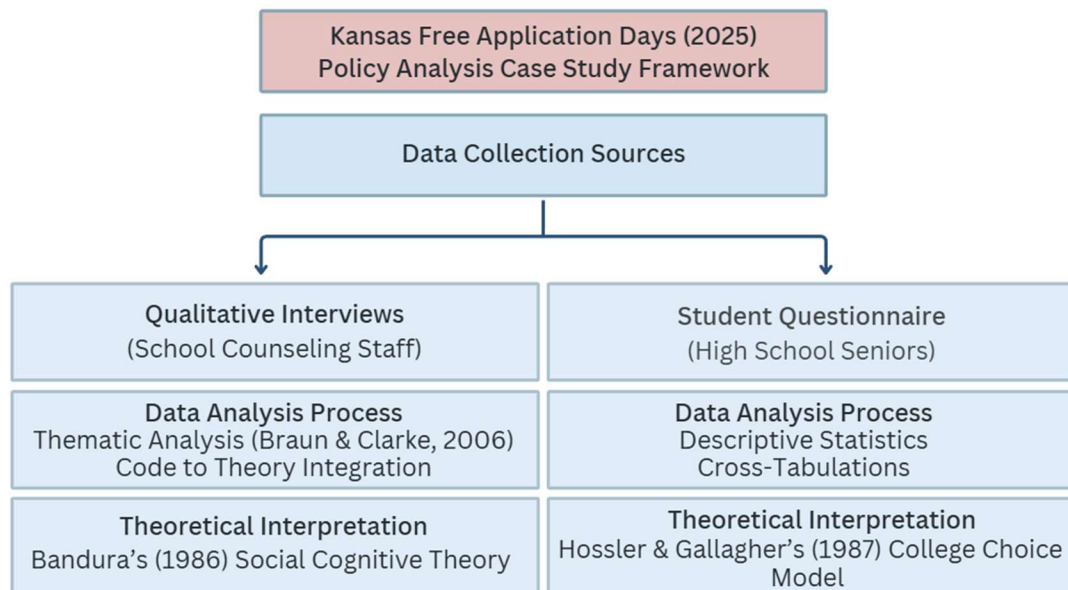


Data Collection Process

Data collection for this policy analysis case study was intentionally structured to capture both student and school counseling staff perspectives during the same policy cycle of the 2025 Kansas Free Application Days initiative. This approach allowed the study to examine how the campaign operated across different educational settings and to identify how local conditions influenced both implementation and student participation. Figure 4.2 provides an overview of the data collection process and the alignment of data sources with the theoretical frameworks guiding this study.

Figure 4.2

Overview of Data Collection and Analysis Processes for the Kansas Free Application Days Policy Analysis Case Study



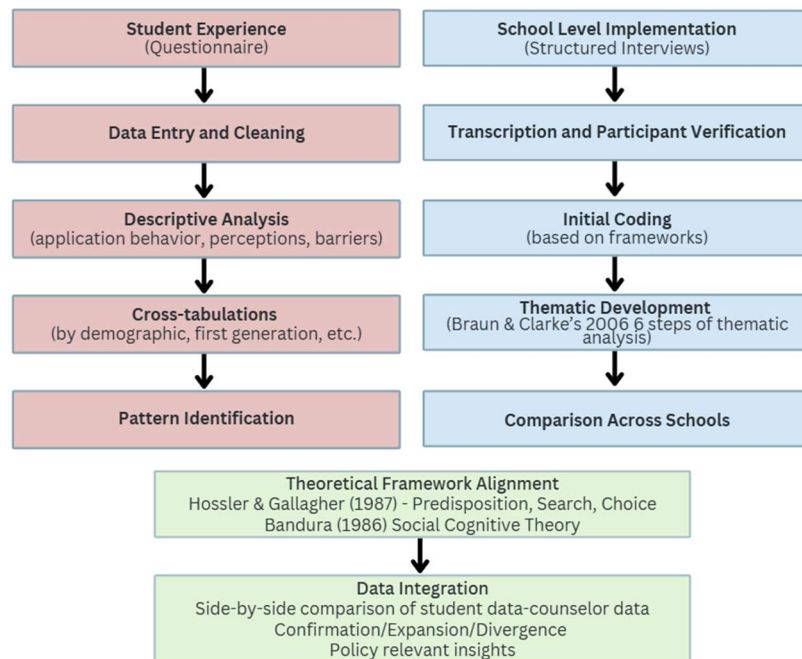
Two primary sources of data were collected: qualitative interviews with school counseling staff and a student questionnaire administered to high school seniors. Both sources were gathered concurrently following the October 2025 Kansas Free Application Days campaign, ensuring that responses reflected current experiences and perceptions of the initiative. Each data source was designed to address the overarching research question, which is how Free Application Campaigns influence students' decisions to apply to college, as well as the two sub-research questions examining the factors that influence participation and the counseling strategies that inform future recommendations for access and equity.

Data Analysis Process

The data analysis process was guided by the policy analysis case study design described in Chapter 3 and aligned with the study's theoretical frameworks. As shown in Figure 4.3, both data sources, the qualitative interviews with school counseling staff and the student questionnaires, were analyzed separately and then integrated to form a comprehensive understanding of how the Kansas Free Application Days influenced student decision-making and school-level implementation practices. This approach ensured that both the voices of school counseling staff and the perspectives of students were represented in the findings while maintaining analytical consistency and rigor. Because several counselor comments span multiple thematic categories, some excerpts appear in more than one section when relevant. This duplication ensures each theme was represented as comprehensively as possible and allowed the findings to remain grounded in participants' own words.

Figure 4.3

Data Analysis Process



Data Collection Results

Across all three participating schools, some level of structured support was provided to students during the three-day Kansas Free Application Days campaign. This consistency ensured that students had access to guidance, technology, and encouragement regardless of their school's size, location, or resources. However, the level of engagement, structure, and student need varied by context, reflecting each school's socioeconomic composition and counseling framework.

At the rural school, Free Application Days were embedded directly into the school day through a required 50-minute personal finance class taken by all seniors. Each student participated in a structured session that included dedicated time, technology access, and individualized support from a collaborative team consisting of the counselor, principal, and classroom teacher. This approach ensured full participation among seniors and enabled students,

many of whom might not otherwise have prioritized the process, to complete at least one college application during the event. Integrating the initiative into an existing course normalized college application completion and enabled sustained real-time coaching, reinforcing equity through universal access.

The suburban school used a flexible, drop-in model that leveraged the library as a central and welcoming space for support. Counseling staff were available throughout the day, allowing students to stop in between classes or during free periods to receive assistance. The library's visibility within the academic wing helped raise awareness and foster an informal yet supportive atmosphere that encouraged participation. This model aligned with the suburban school's advising structure, in which counselors balanced multiple responsibilities while maintaining strong advisory systems and collaborative staff involvement to ensure students could access help when needed.

In contrast, the urban school reflected a markedly different demographic and organizational context that shaped how Kansas Free Application Days were implemented. Approximately 78% of students qualified for free and reduced price lunch, meaning a majority were already eligible for need-based application fee waivers year-round. As a result, many students had the opportunity to apply to college for free before the statewide campaign began, and the counseling staff allowed time for those applications to be completed in advance. The event itself, therefore, served more as a continuation of ongoing college-readiness efforts than a standalone opportunity.

The urban school's counseling department was also structured differently from the other sites. Rather than each counselor sharing equal responsibility for college and career advising, one staff member specialized solely in college and career readiness. The staff member's background

included prior work experience in postsecondary admissions, giving her deep insight into college application processes and institutional expectations. However, because of the school's large enrollment, this specialization also came with significant caseload demands. The counselor supported roughly 1,200 juniors and seniors, part of an overall 1:2,400 counselor-to-student ratio across the high school, making her reach both strategic and broad. Despite this scale, she provided targeted programming, leveraged relationships with college representatives, and created spaces for individualized application support during and surrounding the campaign.

While the urban school's student questionnaire participation rate was lower than that of the rural and suburban schools, this outcome was not viewed as a limitation but as an opportunity to understand the varying levels of engagement and support structures across contexts. The lower response rate reflects a more complex, layered advising environment in which many students had already benefited from year-round access to fee waivers and ongoing college-readiness programming, rather than relying solely on the three-day campaign window. These contextual differences highlight how the statewide initiative interacts with local systems, serving as a catalyst in some schools and as a reinforcement mechanism in others.

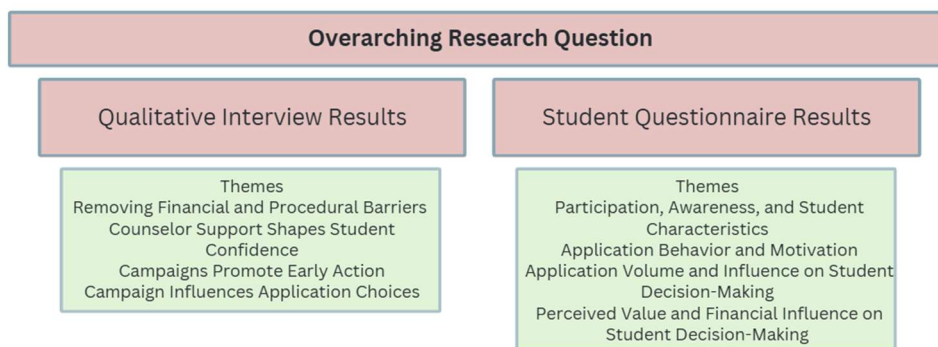
These results demonstrate that all three schools provided structured, intentional opportunities for students to engage with Kansas Free Application Days, though the format and intensity of support reflected each school's demographics, staffing, and existing college-access culture. The rural school's universal class-based model, the suburban school's open and relational drop-in approach, and the urban school's specialized but high-volume advising structure each illustrate how contextual adaptations shape implementation and access. These distinctions provided a critical foundation for interpreting subsequent findings regarding student motivation, counselor practice, and policy implications across diverse educational settings.

Overarching Research Question

This section presents findings addressing the overarching research question: how do free application campaigns influence students' decisions to apply to college. It examines how Kansas Free Application Days shaped students' motivation to apply, understanding of the application process, and institutional choice. Findings are drawn from two data sources: (1) qualitative interviews with school counseling staff who implemented the initiative, and (2) a student questionnaire capturing participants' perceptions of how Free Application Days influenced their decision-making. Findings are organized first by qualitative interviews, which provide depth and context regarding counselor perspectives, followed by results from the student questionnaire, which offer complementary insights from the student perspective. Figure 4.4 provides an overview of the alignment between the overarching research question, the two data sources, and the themes that structure the findings presented in this section.

Figure 4.4

Alignment Overarching Research Question, Data Sources, and Themes



Qualitative Interviews

School counseling staff from three Kansas high schools representing urban, suburban, and rural settings were interviewed to examine their perceptions of the campaign's influence on student participation and decision-making. Each counselor had more than five years of experience in college and career advising and had direct student involvement during the Kansas Free Application Days. Interview questions focused on the structure of the campaign, the types of support provided, and the counselors' observations of student behavior and engagement during the three-day period. All three participating schools structured in-school support opportunities during the Kansas Free Application days. Counselors described how they coordinated space, time, and support so that seniors could answer questions and complete applications with support. The four major themes—Removing Financial and Procedural Barriers, Counselor Support Shapes Student Confidence, Campaigns Promote Early Action, and Campaign Influences Application Choices—reflect the most salient ways school counseling staff perceived Kansas Free Application Days as influencing students' decisions to apply to college. To further illustrate the frequency and distribution of key themes emerging from counselor interviews, Table 4.1 summarizes the primary thematic categories, associated codes, and their occurrence across the three participating school contexts for the overarching research question, How do free application campaigns influence students' decisions to apply to college?

Table 4.1*Overarching Research Question Themes, Codes, and Distribution Across School Contexts*

Theme	Codes	Total Instances	Context Distribution
Removing Financial and Procedural Barriers	Barrier reduction perception (5), application behavior change (3), financial cost sensitivity (8), procedural knowledge (4)	20	Rural: 8 Suburban: 8 Urban: 4
Counselor Support Shapes Student Confidence	Self-efficacy to apply (6), sustained support and next steps (4), support and coaching (7)	15	Rural: 4 Suburban: 5 Urban: 6
Campaigns Promote Early Action	Campaign timing and deadline structure (3), procrastination reduction (3)	6	Rural: 2 Suburban: 2 Urban: 2
Campaign Influences Application Choices	Application volume changes (2), application selection changes (4)	6	Rural: 1 Suburban: 3 Urban: 3

The distribution of coded references shows that the most frequently discussed theme across all three schools was Removing Financial and Procedural Barriers, which counselors identified as the central influence of Kansas Free Application Days on student decision-making. The second most prevalent theme, Counselor Support Shapes Student Confidence, reflected the essential role of school-based guidance and follow-up throughout the event. The remaining two themes—Campaigns Promote Early Action and Campaign Influences Application Choices—highlighted how the campaign’s timing and structure prompted immediate student participation and broadened the range of institutions to which students applied.

Removing Financial and Procedural Barriers

Removing financial and procedural barriers emerged as the most frequently cited influence across all three school contexts (20 coded instances). Counselors consistently described

how eliminating application fees and intentionally scaffolding procedural knowledge fundamentally changed students' engagement with the college application process. Financial costs and procedural confusion were closely intertwined, often compounding one another to create a cycle of inaccessibility. Counselors across urban, suburban, and rural settings emphasized that application fees remained one of the most significant deterrents to student participation. Suburban and rural counseling staff referenced this barrier most frequently (8 instances each), while urban counseling staff highlighted the burden on families whose incomes were just above eligibility thresholds for need-based fee waivers. As the urban counseling staff explained:

Even families that don't qualify for free or reduced lunch, I don't think \$70,000 is a big income for a household, and that will, not always, but sometimes, pop them out of that category. The idea of paying \$45 here and \$45 there affects their budget. So, for those days, I will say that the 20% of students we have who don't qualify [for the need-based application fee waiver] are actively utilizing that opportunity to apply to those Kansas colleges. That's a savings of \$200 to \$350, depending on how many schools they apply to. That's a car payment.

Counseling staff emphasized that the elimination of these costs allowed students to approach the application process with greater confidence and broader aspirations. A suburban counselor explained that without the fee-free application window, the student "would have just applied to those he was very interested in because we would have been very careful about the money." These themes were further illustrated through the rural counselor's description of individual students' application decisions.

I have one who even applied to, I think, seven places, and money is a huge stretch for her. She probably would have applied to only one or two, so it's almost a lottery like, hey, I won the lottery in this three-day time frame. I'm going to apply to as many as I want and keep all my options open, which is exactly what I've always pushed for long before this initiative, but it became a reality because it's free.

The removal of financial risk fundamentally changed student behavior and mindset. Counselors described how students who previously limited applications to a select few options began viewing college applications as opportunities rather than commitments. A suburban counselor stated that “being free is a huge, huge advantage and there's just no risk involved.” This change reframed the process from one of financial risk to one of possibility. Rather than applying only when certain about a choice, students applied more widely, keeping options open and approaching the process as exploration rather than obligation. Counseling staff reported that this freedom encouraged students to test their options, compare offers, and view acceptance as an open door rather than a binding decision.

Beyond financial access, counseling staff noted that Kansas Free Application Days also exposed how financial barriers were often intertwined with procedural ones. Although some students could apply to college for free year-round through need-based fee waivers, procedural obstacles persisted across all school contexts, often preventing eligible students from accessing those benefits. A rural counselor illustrated this challenge by explaining that, “many of our kids don't even know if they're on free or reduced lunch, which is very sad to me,” while also noting that even when supports exist, students often do not take initiative to access them because even though “the relationship is there and the door to get the fee waiver is open for them to ask for it and they don't.”

Counselors acknowledged that part of this challenge stemmed from the confidentiality surrounding students' free and reduced price lunch status. While such information is appropriately protected, it also means that students may be unaware of their eligibility for associated benefits such as application or testing fee waivers unless someone explicitly informs them. As the suburban school counselor reflected, "I think that we need to do a better job at making sure that they're aware of it, but if they are aware of it, they use it." Others emphasized that awareness alone is complicated by the volume and complexity of information students are expected to process. An urban counselor described this cognitive burden, noting, "it's a whole lot of information. You're trying to teach them all those little words and definitions so that they understand how it applies to them."

In schools with particularly high percentages of students qualifying for free and reduced price lunch, the process of managing fee waiver documentation also created additional administrative burden. Simplifying these procedures reduced barriers for both students and staff. The urban counseling staff noted:

I'm so grateful to some of the schools finally not having us submit a fee waiver form. I think there is still one university holding strong to me having to fill that out and send that back in. I will say that when a student self-identifies and in an application it asks do I qualify and they check that I am on free and reduced lunch. For the most part, the institution trusts that student as they should because very soon they will get their FAFSA and see that they are Pell eligible.

It is worth noting that not all school counseling staff are aware that paper-based waiver forms are no longer required at several Kansas public institutions, a relatively recent procedural change in which the question is embedded directly within the admissions application. However,

counselors also emphasized that procedural barriers extended well beyond fee waiver processes to include broader gaps in students' understanding of how to apply for college. As one suburban counselor reflected, "I think a lot of them just don't know. I assume they know, and they do not." The suburban counselor recounted an experience that underscored how disconnected some students were from the college application process:

I'm here to apply, what do I do? He was looking for a paper application and thought like there was going to be a rep here and then I was like, no, it's not 1994, you don't get the application from your counselor, just Google it. You can just go straight on there and apply. I don't think that kid ever would have applied for college had he not heard of this. He thought that it was on paper, I can tell he wasn't on the forefront of his mind until those three days.

Although a college-going atmosphere exists, it cannot be taken for granted, as many students and families continue to struggle to navigate the college application process independently. The suburban counselor captured this disconnect by noting, "I do feel like, even though we have a college-bound culture here. I feel like there's still quite a few families that are just absolutely clueless." In this context, the Kansas Free Application Days prompted staff to reflect on how often procedural knowledge is implicitly assumed, even when it is not consistently understood or accessible. A rural counselor similarly reflected on how participation in Apply Kansas challenged long-held assumptions about what students understand about the application process. The counselor explained,

The Apply Kansas initiative has allowed for so much more communication and understanding of the process. What I thought was just common sense when I first learned about it was like, wow, shouldn't they know this? I realized I was wrong in

my assumption because we do this every day. We assume they know how to complete these applications. I always have to come back to the idea that if they aren't doing something right, it's probably because they don't know how to do it. This has been exactly that, a pulling back to center and teaching them how.

The suburban counselor echoed this perspective, emphasizing the confidence building impact of explicit instruction during Free Application Days. The counselor shared,

I think it definitely boosts confidence for sure, and it gives them knowledge too because I always assumed they knew before this, but they just plain don't. Once they see that they can answer the questions and know how to navigate the process, they're not as tripped up the next time they fill out an application. They learn more about themselves, especially because there was such a huge barrier before.

Counselors' reflections illustrated that addressing procedural barriers was as essential as removing financial ones. Kansas Free Application Days provided both the incentive and the structure for counselors to explicitly teach the application process, allowing students to practice skills they would not have developed independently. The initiative thus functioned as both an access mechanism and a learning opportunity, helping demystify the college going process for students and families alike.

Counselor Support Shapes Student Confidence

Counselor support emerged as the second most frequently discussed influence across all three school contexts, with 15 coded instances reflecting themes of self-efficacy to apply (6), sustained support and next steps (4), and individualized coaching (7). Counselors consistently described how their encouragement, guidance, and availability during Kansas Free Application Days shaped students' confidence and willingness to apply to college. While the removal of

financial and procedural barriers made college more accessible, counselors emphasized that their relational presence and personalized coaching were the elements that transformed opportunity into action. Students often sought reassurance that they were completing applications correctly or validation that they were capable of succeeding in postsecondary settings. Counselors viewed the event as a structured opportunity that helped students move from intention to completion.

Counselors reported that their direct involvement, whether through one-on-one guidance or in a group setting, boosted students' confidence and reduced hesitation. In each setting, counselors noted that the immediate availability of trusted adults made the process feel manageable and attainable. The rural counselor shared:

What I have found is that even with the other counselor and teacher and principal in there, they want me or their teacher. They truly don't want to ask the questions of others or even people that they don't know that well.

This comment reflected the relational trust that underpinned successful participation. Students were more likely to engage and ask questions when supported by familiar and trusted staff. Counseling staff illustrated how this trust translated into hands-on, individualized support for students who lacked prior exposure to the college application process. The suburban counselor described working closely with a first generation student during Kansas Free Application Days, explaining that the initiative functioned as a critical catalyst for engagement because “the free application days definitely got him started because he’s first generation and they had no clue about the process.”

In reflecting on additional student experiences, this counselor also described supporting an adopted immigrant student whose participation in Free Application Days revealed procedural and identity-related barriers. During the application process, the student was required to clarify

questions about citizenship, prompting conversations with family members. As the suburban counselor reflected, “It was actually a really cool experience because I had no idea that was the case for him. I don’t know that that kid would have ever applied without this.” The counselor noted that the student’s parent later contacted the school to express deep appreciation for the individualized guidance and support provided during the application process, emphasizing how meaningful the assistance was for both the student and the family as they navigated the postsecondary process.

Together, these examples demonstrate how counselor support during Kansas Free Application Days often extended beyond application completion to include navigation of family history, citizenship questions, and first generation uncertainty. In these cases, the campaign created a structured moment in which counselors could intervene, clarify expectations, and normalize the college application process for students who otherwise lacked the knowledge or confidence to initiate it independently. Counselors also described how the concentrated support structure during Free Application Days created a heightened sense of accessibility, as the urban counselor explained that during the event, “I’m officially the most wanted person in the school during those days, especially. They come to my office, my classroom, and apply.”

This surge in interaction underscored how visible, personalized support during the campaign helped demystify the application process and empowered students to take initiative. The suburban counselor echoed this sentiment, explaining how years of involvement had strengthened her credibility and reach:

I’ve kind of been there, done that, the last few years I’ve been entrenched in it, and then being a counselor in the building where my kids go, then I have become that person for a lot of their friends and families, and things like that. So, yes, and because

I'm out in the community, I'm at cross country meets, and they're like, tell me about how to apply here, how to do that. Because I've been here for so long, they recognize me as that person.

This relational consistency translated into increased student self-efficacy. Counselors across settings described visible shifts in student attitudes, from doubt to excitement, as they realized that college admission was within reach. The urban counselor explained that “once they realize that they're worthy enough and that they might just be able to actually afford to go to college, they get excited about applying,” highlighting how both affirmation and affordability shaped students’ motivation. Similarly, the suburban counselor noted that Kansas Free Application Days provided students with early, low risk exposure to the application process, observing that “it also gives them some experience in applying and then maybe they'll not be so hesitant to apply to other schools later on as well,” and adding that even receiving acceptance, it “gives them the confidence that they can do it, that they are prepared to do it.”

Counselors also highlighted how this confidence connected to a broader sense of hope and belonging cultivated over time within their schools. The rural counselor explained:

To have the relationships with them to buy into the things that we provide for them, and then to have that vision and hope that I feel we've worked so hard over the years to instill. They have that vision and hope that I can do this.

These reflections demonstrate how the campaign’s structure aligned with years of ongoing counseling work centered on building relational trust, self-belief, and long-term aspirations. Through these accounts, counselor narratives revealed that Kansas Free Application Days not only reduced structural barriers but also built psychological readiness. The campaign

created conditions in which students could experience success early, reinforcing their confidence to pursue additional applications and envision themselves as college-bound.

Campaigns Promote Early Action

The theme Campaigns Promote Early Action appeared in six coded instances across all three school contexts (Rural: 2; Suburban: 2; Urban: 2). Counselors described how the timing and structured nature of Kansas Free Application Days encouraged students to act earlier than they might have otherwise. The three-day statewide event created a sense of urgency that countered procrastination, provided a clear and attainable deadline, and prompted students to prioritize completing applications before other competing commitments. Counselors across settings noted that without the campaign, many students would have delayed applying until later in the school year or avoided the process altogether. The campaign's timing in early October, before scholarship or housing deadlines, was identified as an important factor that positioned college applications as a priority. Counselors described the event as both a motivator and a planning tool that helped them structure the advising process and guide students toward goal-oriented completion. The urban counselor explained that "we know this is a step that must be taken, and this is an opportunity for them because it's free today, and they need to go and take care of business." This sense of immediacy was reinforced by the urban counseling staff who explained that the campaign "creates urgency," adding that it served as a concrete advising tool to signal to students that "this is the time we need to apply."

Similarly, counselors in rural and suburban settings shared that the campaign helped curb procrastination by establishing a visible, time-bound expectation. A rural counselor explained:

They're all guilty at times thinking, I'll do that tomorrow, I'll do that tomorrow. We're already mid-October. I always tell them you're going to run out of time and we need

to stay on this track in order to be ready for the next thing, you know, our FAFSA has got to be rolling. So, I feel like they would procrastinate without this.

The suburban counselor described how Kansas Free Application Days helped formalize the application process and strengthen a culture of early engagement:

It puts it in their mind and it makes them have a set time to actually think about it, because I do think that they would push off their decisions a lot more. It definitely becomes way more of a culture among students, this is the time I need to be focused. This is when I need to be starting to think about colleges and what I'm doing next year.

This shared sense of purpose often permeated classrooms and peer interactions, creating excitement and normalizing participation. The suburban counselor recalled the school-wide atmosphere during the event:

It was very much a thing. That's what we were doing that day, for those three days. It was very much the buzz. I walked into a Comp class just to chat with the teacher and they were all like, I'm applying today, I'm applying today, I'm applying today, also.

Counselors agreed that the campaign's structure not only encouraged students to apply earlier but also fostered a collective momentum within the school community. The designated time frame prompted students to act, peers to participate, and educators to reinforce the message that college planning should begin now. Through these accounts, counselors described Kansas Free Application Days as a catalyst for early engagement, transforming the college application process from a distant task into an immediate, shared priority.

Campaign Influences Application Choices

This theme appeared in six coded instances across rural, suburban, and urban school contexts and captures shifts in both application volume and application selection. Counselors described how Kansas Free Application Days broadened students' consideration sets and reduced the perceived risk of applying, leading some students to include institutions they previously viewed as financially out of reach and to submit a greater number of applications overall. Counselors noted that the campaign helped students move beyond narrow assumptions about affordability and fit, the urban counselor explained that they focus on "building and getting them excited, expanding that viewpoint" because students are often "so myopic on, well, all I can afford is this school." These conversations often extended beyond application completion to include discussions about merit aid, Pell Grant eligibility, and scholarship opportunities that could make broader choices feasible. Counselors often encouraged students to apply even when affordability felt uncertain, using the application process itself as a way to challenge students' assumptions. The urban counselor described, "so then I start to talk to them about, let's go ahead and put in that application because they're like, you think I can actually afford to go there? Well, apply."

The rural school structured Kansas Free Application Days during a class period to maximize participation and momentum. Hosting the event during a class period allowed students to complete one application and continue applying throughout the three-day window:

They get done in the class period and then I say, let's go for more, let's do another one. You've got two more days. So, we usually do it on the first day of the Apply Free Days. So, we did ours on Monday, and that allowed for Tuesday and Wednesday to still be open for them to do another one or another one.

This suggests that the number of applications submitted during Kansas Free Application Days may be influenced by how schools structure the event and the degree of staff encouragement to apply to multiple institutions. Counselors also shared personal examples illustrating how the campaign's influence extended beyond their professional observations. The suburban school counselor noted that, prior to the campaign, their son "would not have applied to KU [University of Kansas]... KU and WSU [Wichita State University] would never have been on his list," but exposure to the campaign prompted him to apply to institutions he had not previously considered. The counselor further described how this shift normalized submitting multiple applications, noting that their son approached the process by saying, "I'm going to whip out as many applications as I possibly can and keep all of those doors open." Across accounts, Kansas Free Application Days were described as reshaping students' decision-making by removing financial barriers and cultivating a mindset of exploration. Rather than limiting applications to familiar or low-cost options, students used the opportunity to test possibilities, compare offers, and imagine new postsecondary pathways.

Student Questionnaire

To complement the counselor interviews, data from the student questionnaire were analyzed to provide an additional perspective on the overarching research question. Whereas interviews revealed how counselors perceived the influence of Kansas Free Application Days on student behavior, the questionnaire captured students' firsthand experiences and perceptions of the campaign's usefulness, barriers encountered, and the role of cost in their decision-making. As shown in Table 4.2, student questionnaire items align closely with the four qualitative themes that emerged from the counselor interviews, illustrating how both data sources address overlapping aspects of financial access, procedural understanding, counselor support, motivation,

and college choice.

Table 4.2

Alignment of Student Questionnaire Items with Qualitative Themes Related to the Overarching Research Question

Theme	Related Student Questions
Removing Financial and Procedural Barriers	Q1, Q2, Q12, Q17
Counselor Support Shapes Student Confidence	Q10, Q11, Q16
Campaigns Promote Early Action	Q1, Q5, Q6, Q9, Q10
Campaign Influences Application Choices	Q1, Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10, Q13, Q14

Because each data source addressed the research questions from different analytic perspectives, the thematic structure for the student questionnaire was intentionally not identical to the qualitative interview coding scheme. Counselor interviews were coded through the guiding theoretical frameworks to capture implementation and advising practices, while questionnaire groupings were constructed to reflect descriptive patterns in student participation, motivation, and perceived barriers. The following section summarizes student responses across all survey items related to Kansas Free Application Days. Together, these findings provide insight into how students experienced the campaign, the extent to which it influenced their application behavior, and the barriers that continued to shape their college decision-making process.

Student Questionnaire Results

To complement counselor perspectives, student questionnaire data were analyzed to further address the overarching research question: How do Free Application Campaigns influence students' decisions to apply to college? A total of 141 completed questionnaires were analyzed. Findings describe who participated in the Kansas Free Application Days, the extent of

student awareness about year-round fee-waiver opportunities, and the characteristics of participating students.

Participation, Awareness, and Student Characteristics

Nearly three-quarters of respondents (72%) reported submitting an application for admission during the Kansas Free Application Days. This strong participation rate demonstrates broad engagement among seniors across the participating schools, suggesting that the statewide campaign effectively encouraged students to take action during the application window. The findings support counselor reports that the temporary removal of application fees, combined with structured, in-school support, increased both student access and motivation to apply. The remaining 28% of students who did not apply during the campaign may represent those who had already completed applications earlier in the fall semester or who remained undecided about pursuing postsecondary education.

Although participation during the designated Free Application Days was high, awareness of existing year-round need-based application fee-waiver opportunities varied among respondents. Just over half of students (54%) reported knowing that students experiencing financial hardship can apply to college for free throughout the year, while 45% indicated they were unaware of this option. Awareness levels also differed by school context, with rural students demonstrating the highest awareness (67%), followed by urban students (29%) and suburban students (16%). Student demographic characteristics provide important context for interpreting participation and awareness patterns. With respect to first generation status, the majority of respondents identified as not first generation college students, while just over one-fifth reported being first generation. A small proportion of students were unsure of their status or did not respond, suggesting some ambiguity in how students understand or identify first

generation status. First generation status is summarized in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3

First Generation Status of Student Questionnaire Respondents

Variable	Frequency (n=141)	Percentage
First Generation		
No	99	70%
Yes	30	21%
Unsure	7	5%
No answer	8	4%

The racial and ethnic composition of respondents further contextualizes the student sample. The majority of participants identified as White, with smaller proportions identifying as Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, or two or more races. Very few students identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, and no students identified as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. A small number of respondents selected prefer not to answer. Racial and ethnic characteristics are presented in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4

Ethnicity of Student Questionnaire Respondents

Variable	Frequency (n=141)	Percentage
Ethnicity		
American Indian or Alaska Native		
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	1%
Asian	7	5%
Black or African American	6	4%
Hispanic or Latino	5	4%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	0%
White	109	77%
Two or more races	6	4%

Application Behavior and Motivation

Survey items addressing application behavior and motivation explored how Kansas Free Application Days influenced students' intent to apply, reasons for participating, and perceptions of the campaign's usefulness. The results presented in Tables 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7 illustrate how financial considerations, school-based support, and procedural guidance intersect to shape student decision-making. Before learning about Kansas Free Application Days, most students already planned to apply to college. However, approximately 10% of respondents indicated they either had no plans to apply or were uncertain about applying prior to the campaign. As summarized in Table 4.5, this subset represents students for whom the initiative may have served as a catalyst for action, highlighting the campaign's potential to reach undecided students who might not have applied otherwise.

Among those who were unsure or not planning to apply, students identified several barriers influencing their hesitation. The most frequently reported barriers were not knowing where to start, the cost of application fees, followed by believing they could not afford college. Additional barriers included being unsure if college was right for them, lack of encouragement to apply, and other individual factors. These responses mirror counselor interview themes emphasizing how procedural uncertainty and financial concerns often compound one another, discouraging students from applying even when broader college aspirations exist.

Table 4.5*Barriers Among Students Initially Uncertain About Applying to College*

Variable	Percentage
Reason for Applying	
Didn't know where to start	35%
Cost of application fees	30%
Didn't think I could afford college	23%
Unsure if college is right for me	18%
Other	16%
No one encouraged me to apply	6%

Note. Percentages reflect the proportion of respondents who selected each option. Because participants could choose more than one response, percentages do not total 100%.

As shown in Table 4.6, students were asked about their main motivation for applying during the Free Application Days. Saving money on application fees emerged as the primary motivator, while exploring additional college options and encouragement from school personnel were also frequently cited. These findings reinforce the importance of both financial incentives and school-level encouragement in prompting student engagement with the application process.

Table 4.6*Reasons Students Applied During the Kansas Free Application Days*

Variable	Percent of Total Respondents*
Barrier	
To save money on application fees	48%
To explore more college options	11%
My school encouraged me to apply	11%
Other	.01%

Note. Percentages reflect the proportion of respondents who selected each option. Because participants could choose more than one response, percentages do not total 100%.

Students were also asked to reflect on what would have further reduced barriers in their college application process (see Table 4.7). Rather than identifying a single dominant solution, respondents emphasized multiple forms of support, including extended deadlines for free application fees, increased access to information about college options, and additional support from school counselors. These responses suggest that while the removal of fees remains vital, students continue to value informational and relational supports that help them navigate procedural steps and make informed postsecondary choices. A smaller portion of respondents offered other individualized suggestions, reflecting diverse contextual needs within the application process.

Table 4.7

Recommendations for Reducing Barriers in College Application Process

Variable	Percentage
Reducing Barriers in Application Process	
Extended deadlines for free application fees	45%
More information on college options	45%
More support from school counselors	45%
Other	6%

Note. Percentages reflect the proportion of respondents who selected each option. Because participants could choose more than one response, percentages do not total 100%.

Application Volume and Influence on Student Decision-Making

In addition to influencing how many colleges students applied to, the Kansas Free Application Days initiative also appeared to shape where students chose to apply. As summarized in Table 4.8, just over one-third of respondents reported that the event influenced their decision on where to apply or enroll, suggesting that waived fees encouraged consideration of additional or alternative institutions. In contrast, approximately one-third indicated that the

campaign did not influence their decision, while the remaining respondents expressed uncertainty. These findings indicate that the initiative prompted many students to broaden their options, while others remained guided by preexisting plans or priorities.

Following questions on motivation, students were asked to report the total number of colleges to which they applied and how many of those applications were submitted during Kansas Free Application Days. Overall, students demonstrated a focused approach to the application process, with most applying to a limited number of institutions. Application behavior clustered around one to three colleges, suggesting that students were largely intentional in their choices rather than broadly applying to numerous institutions.

Table 4.8

Number of Colleges Students Applied To

Response	Percentage
Number of Colleges Applied To	
1	12%
2	23%
3	15%
4	6%
5	3%
6 or more	9%

When asked specifically about applications submitted during Kansas Free Application Days, a similar pattern emerged, with most respondents submitting one or two applications during the event. Notably, these application volume statistics also include students who reported they had not intended to complete any college applications prior to the initiative. This suggests the initiative not only encouraged students to apply to more institutions than they otherwise would have, but also prompted participation among students who might not otherwise have

entered the application process at all. More than half of respondents indicated that Kansas Free Application Days influenced them to apply to more colleges than originally planned, illustrating how the campaign expanded the range of institutions students were willing to consider by temporarily removing cost and procedural barriers.

Table 4.9

College Application Submission Totals

Locale	Total Applications Submitted					
	1	2	3	4	5	6 or more
Urban	69%	13%				19%
Suburban	34%	26%	11%	10%	5%	11%
Rural	17%	37%	31%	6%	2%	7%

Locale	Total Applications Submitted During Kansas Free Application Days					
	1	2	3	4	5	6 or more
Urban	71%	14%				14%
Suburban	62%	18%	11%	2%	2%	5%
Rural	20%	46%	24%	4%		6%

As shown in Table 4.9, application patterns differed by locale both overall and during the Kansas Free Application Days, illustrating how local context and implementation structure shaped student engagement. These patterns appear closely tied to how the initiative was delivered within each school setting. In the rural school, nearly all seniors participated because the event was embedded into a required class period. Every student had structured time, counselor support, and computer access to complete applications. This built-in model corresponded with higher rates of multiple applications both overall and during the campaign, suggesting that dedicated instructional time and guided assistance encouraged broader application behavior.

In the suburban school, participation took place through an on-site application event that students could attend during the designated days. Application patterns remained relatively consistent before and during the campaign, with most students submitting one or two applications. This consistency may indicate that students who chose to participate largely followed through on preexisting plans, while the optional structure of the event did not substantially increase application volume.

The urban school displayed a distinct trend, with most students applying to only one college both overall and during Kansas Free Application Days. Counselor interviews suggested that many urban students already qualified for year-round need-based application fee waivers, which lessened the financial incentive associated with the three-day campaign. A smaller subset of students in the urban setting used the event to submit applications, indicating that the campaign still functioned as a timely prompt or organizational support even in contexts with strong access.

These results suggest that the delivery model, particularly whether time and support were integrated into the school day, strongly influenced application patterns. When Kansas Free Application Days were embedded within the academic schedule, as in the rural setting, students were more likely to apply to multiple institutions. In settings where the event was held separately from class time or where students already benefited from existing fee-waiver opportunities, application behavior showed less variation, emphasizing the importance of both implementation design and local context in moderating the campaign's impact on student decision-making.

Perceived Value and Financial Influence on Student Decision-Making

Beyond participation rates and application behavior, students were asked to reflect on how school-based supports and financial considerations influenced their experiences with Kansas

Free Application Days and their subsequent college decisions. Nearly all respondents (89%) reported that their high school offered events or support specifically related to Free Application Days, such as Apply Kansas, college application workshops, or counselor-led sessions. This widespread availability of school-based support indicates that most students experienced Kansas Free Application Days as a structured, facilitated process rather than an isolated or self-directed task, reinforcing the role of institutional support in reducing procedural barriers.

When asked to what extent Kansas Free Application Days reduced financial barriers to applying for college, student perceptions reflected varying levels of impact (see Table 4.10). More than one-third of respondents perceived the initiative as having a substantial effect on reducing cost-related barriers. This variation suggests that while the removal of application fees was meaningful for many students, financial considerations remained layered and context-dependent, influenced by other factors.

Table 4.10

Extent to Which Free Application Days Reduced Financial Barriers to Applying

Response Category	Percentage
Extent Free Application Days Reduced Financial Barriers	
Extremely	17.5%
Very	17.5%
Moderately	24.7%
Slightly	26.8%
Not at all	13.4%

To further explain this variation in perceived financial impact, respondents were asked whether a standard college application fee would have influenced their enrollment decision. When asked whether a standard application fee between \$40 and \$50 would have changed their

enrollment decision, responses were evenly divided. 45% of respondents stated they would have enrolled in the same institution even if an application fee had been required, suggesting their enrollment decisions were largely unaffected by the cost of applying. An equal proportion (45%) indicated that the fee would have influenced their choice, reporting that they would have enrolled at a different institution if the fee had been in place. The remaining 10% were unsure whether an application fee would have altered their decision, reflecting some uncertainty or limited awareness of how financial barriers shape college choice. Overall, these findings highlight the combined influence of financial access and institutional support in shaping student decision-making. Even modest application fees appeared to influence where students applied and ultimately enrolled, underscoring the importance of initiatives like Kansas Free Application Days in promoting equitable college access and encouraging broader postsecondary exploration.

Underrepresented Students

Further analysis focused on responses from underrepresented students, defined as those who self-identified as first generation college students and or students of color. Overall, findings from this subgroup point to persistent informational, financial, and procedural barriers, reinforcing the need for targeted communication and school-based supports. Despite participating in the Kansas Free Application Days, nearly half of underrepresented respondents reported being unaware of year-round need-based application fee waivers, indicating continued gaps in college knowledge even among engaged students. This finding suggests that Free Application Days may serve as an entry point to the application process but do not fully address broader awareness of ongoing financial supports.

Among underrepresented students who submitted an application during the Free Application Days, a subset indicated that they had not planned to apply to college prior to the

three-day event. As summarized in Table 4.11, these students identified multiple, overlapping barriers that contributed to their initial uncertainty, including not knowing where to begin, concerns about affordability, and uncertainty about whether college was the right option. Rather than a single deterrent, the data illustrates the cumulative and multifaceted nature of access barriers faced by underrepresented students.

Table 4.11

Barriers Among Underrepresented Students Initially Uncertain About Applying to College

Variable	Percentage
Reason for Applying	
Didn't know where to start	28%
Cost of application fees	23%
Didn't think I could afford college	30%
Unsure if college is right for me	26%
Other	13%
No one encouraged me to apply	6%

Note. Percentages reflect the proportion of respondents who selected each option. Because participants could choose more than one response, percentages do not total 100%.

Motivations for participating in the Kansas Free Application Days are presented in Table 4.12. Financial considerations emerged as the most salient factor, with fee elimination serving as a critical catalyst for engagement. However, school-based encouragement and the opportunity to explore additional college options also played an important role, highlighting the influence of institutional support and counselor-driven outreach in promoting participation.

Table 4.12*Reasons Underrepresented Students Applied During the Kansas Free Application Days*

Variable	Percent of Total Respondents*
Barrier	
To save money on application fees	48%
To explore more college options	11%
My school encouraged me to apply	11%
Other	6%

Note. Percentages reflect the proportion of respondents who selected each option. Because participants could choose more than one response, percentages do not total 100%.

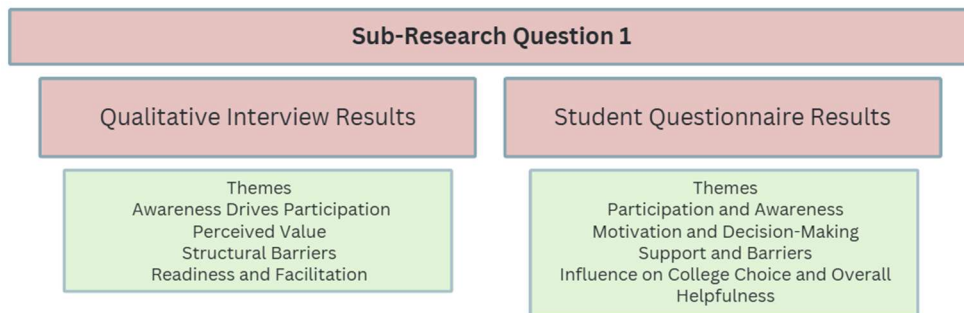
Cost sensitivity extended beyond the application stage. Approximately one-third of underrepresented students indicated that a \$40–\$50 application fee would have influenced where they ultimately enrolled, while a similar proportion reported that enrollment decisions would have remained unchanged. This split underscores the varied ways financial barriers shape postsecondary decision-making within underrepresented populations. Even with fee removal, barriers persisted for many students. A substantial proportion of underrepresented respondents reported encountering challenges during the application process, most commonly related to unfamiliarity with application procedures. At the same time, a majority described the Kansas Free Application Days as very or extremely helpful, suggesting that the initiative played a meaningful role in increasing access, confidence, and momentum for students who have been historically underrepresented in higher education. Collectively, these findings indicate that while Kansas Free Application Days expanded participation and reduced immediate financial barriers, sustained efforts focused on early communication, procedural guidance, and targeted outreach remain essential to advancing long-term equity in college access and enrollment.

Sub-Research Question 1

This section presents findings addressing the first sub-research question: what factors influence students' decisions to participate in the Kansas Free Application Days. It examines the primary factors that motivated or discouraged student participation. As with the overarching research question, findings are organized in two parts: (1) qualitative interviews with school counseling staff who implemented the initiative, and (2) student questionnaire results that capture students' perspectives on their awareness, motivations, and barriers to participation. Together, these data sources provide both contextual understanding and descriptive insight into the influences shaping student participation in the campaign. Figure 4.5 illustrates the alignment between Sub-Research Question 1, the two data sources, and the themes that guided analysis of factors influencing student participation.

Figure 4.5

Alignment of Sub Research Question 1, Data Sources, and Themes



Qualitative Interviews

Counselors across all three participating schools identified several interrelated factors that influenced student participation in the Kansas Free Application Days. Four major themes

emerged from the interviews: Awareness Drives Participation, Perceived Value, Structural Barriers, and Readiness and Facilitation. These themes represent the ways students' exposure to information, perceptions of benefit, and access to institutional and counselor support shaped their likelihood of applying during the campaign. To illustrate the frequency and distribution of these themes, Table 4.13 summarizes the primary categories, related codes, and their occurrence across the three participating school contexts as it related to Sub-Research Question 1 What factors influence students' decisions to participate in the Kansas Free Application Days?

Table 4.13

Sub-Research Question 1 Themes, Codes, and Distribution Across School Contexts

Theme	Codes	Total Instances	Context Distribution
Awareness Drives Participation	Communication and exposure (3), information clarity (2), peer influence (5)	8	Rural: 4 Suburban: 4 Urban: 2
Perceived Value	Financial savings perception (4), Reduced risk (3)	4	Rural: 3 Suburban: 2 Urban: 2
Structural Barriers	Counselor availability and workload (2), scheduling and competing demands (1)	3	Rural: 1 Suburban: 0 Urban: 2
Readiness and Facilitation	Family and cultural expectations (2), student preparation (1), institutional support structures (4)	7	Rural: 3 Suburban: 2 Urban: 2

The distribution of coded references indicates that Awareness Drives Participation was the most frequently discussed theme across all three schools, underscoring that communication and exposure were central to student engagement. Counseling staff emphasized that participation

often depended on whether students received clear and repeated information about the opportunity and understood that it was a limited time event. Readiness and Facilitation was the next most prominent theme, highlighting how family encouragement, counselor guidance, and structured in-school support collectively enabled students to complete applications during the designated days. Perceived Value encompassed both students' recognition of the financial benefit of applying without cost and the reduced sense of risk associated with doing so. Counselors observed that when the financial barrier was removed, students felt more motivated and confident to apply, often submitting additional applications they might not have otherwise pursued. Finally, Structural Barriers, though less frequently mentioned, revealed that counselor workload, scheduling conflicts, and competing commitments occasionally limited participation, particularly in larger or urban schools where individualized support was more difficult to provide.

Awareness Drives Participation

Across all three schools, school counseling staff emphasized that consistent and visible communication was a key factor influencing student awareness and participation in the Kansas Free Application Days. Early and ongoing messaging helped create a sense of readiness among students, particularly when information was shared through multiple channels such as parent emails, announcements, and counselor-led events. Counselors described beginning outreach well before the application window, with the rural counselor explaining that they “start talking about this with the families at our senior orientation in August with students and families so that they know.” The counselor also noted that beginning in mid-September, they send “once a month or sometimes twice a month emails to our senior parents,” acknowledging that while seniors often

receive frequent communication, “our parents aren’t always” as connected with the communications.

As the initiative entered its third year, counselors noted growing momentum and recognition among students and families. Reflecting on this increased awareness, the same rural counselor observed that “as the initiative has grown here... they know what it is and it’s an exciting thing that our seniors get to experience,” adding that parental understanding and support had strengthened over time. Counselors in other contexts similarly emphasized the importance of repetition and visibility during the application window itself, with a suburban counselor describing how they “sent emails” and shared reminders “every day that week,” and an urban counselor highlighting layered communication strategies, noting, “I put it on the announcements, they’ve got the flyers, it’s been sent to the parents.”

Preparation was also cited as an essential element in promoting awareness. Counseling staff described how deliberate pre-event communication, reminders, and planning time helped students arrive better prepared to apply. The rural counselor emphasized the importance of engaging families in advance, noting that they encouraged students to “go home and talk to your parents” so key questions were answered ahead of time, explaining that “the prep work empowers them” for the free application event. The counselor described preparation as a way to help students take ownership of the process and arrive with clearer intentions and expectations.

We built up to the event about 3 different times. I was with them the Friday before we had our Apply Kansas day on Monday. On that Friday they had their worksheet that they answered all their questions in preparation for Monday's free application day. At that time, I said, I want you to list 2 or 3 places they wanted to apply to so they had a game plan going into Monday.

Counselors across contexts also emphasized sequencing exposure and preparation as a strategy to broaden application behaviors. The urban counselor stated:

We do something monthly. We start by having a college and career fair early. Then, our students remember who they've met with, and they make a list as opposed to that myopic train of thought like I'm just going to apply to KU. It changes to now we've been exposed to multiple options; let's go ahead and apply to this many because it says free in Kansas. So, we begin with exposure, then we have our free application days.

In addition to in-school preparation, counselors highlighted the importance of supporting families alongside students. The suburban counselor described hosting a “how to apply to college webinar” for families and offering targeted seminar sessions focused specifically on college applications to reinforce readiness and reduce confusion. In all three school contexts, awareness was further amplified through peer influence. When students saw classmates applying during the campaign, participation became a collective experience. Counselors observed that this social momentum encouraged even reluctant students to apply and fostered a positive, college going culture. The suburban counselor captured this momentum by explaining that participation often occurred simply because “everybody’s doing it, everybody’s going to the library today,” which prompted even hesitant students to join. The counselor further reflected that this peer dynamic normalized applying, describing how students thought, “my friends are applying, then I’m going to apply,” and were often surprised and excited when acceptance messages followed. Counselors also observed that peer-driven engagement fostered informal accountability and competition, further reinforcing a college going culture. The urban counselor shared:

I overheard a conversation in my room because they'll come and sit in my room at lunch and work on stuff because there's not a lot of free time. I overheard someone say, 'did you get in KSU [Kansas State University] or KU because I got it in' So, they become competitive.

Counselors emphasized that this collective environment also made it easier for students to ask questions and seek clarification without stigma. The rural counselor also explained that the public and celebratory nature of the event helped normalize the application process and encouraged student engagement:

They all want their picture taken and celebrated. I feel like it's been a great initiative that shows them how to apply. It makes it OK for them to ask questions because their peers are asking questions like how do I know that they're going to get my ACT score? There are all these questions getting asked simultaneously as we're in the room and we break it down.

This peer-supported culture was particularly impactful for students who may not have otherwise engaged in the college application process. Reflecting on this broader cultural effect, the suburban counselor noted that a student “would never have applied to college” had it not been for those days, emphasizing that participation was driven less by individual motivation and more by the culture created around the event.

Overall, counseling staff described awareness as the foundation upon which all other factors depended. When students understood what the Kansas Free Application Days offered, when and how to participate, and saw their peers engaged, participation flourished.

Communication alone was not sufficient, what mattered most was the consistency, visibility, and timing of information paired with structured preparation and social reinforcement. Across rural,

suburban, and urban schools alike, awareness transformed the initiative from a simple informational campaign into a shared community event that normalized the act of applying to college. This groundwork of exposure and expectation not only encouraged participation but also set the stage for how students perceived the value and purpose of the campaign itself.

Perceived Value

Counselors across rural, suburban, and urban schools consistently described students' perception of value as a central motivator for participation in the Kansas Free Application Days. The elimination of application fees reframed college applications as a low-risk, high-reward opportunity, particularly for students who were uncertain about committing to a single institution. Students were encouraged to see them as an investment in their future. Removing cost from the process allowed students to apply with greater confidence and curiosity about their options. In the rural context, counseling staff emphasized the importance of helping students and families see the tangible financial benefits of applying during the fee-free window. The rural counselor compared the opportunity to receiving a bonus paycheck, explaining:

You're going to walk away from \$50 bonus on your paycheck. You're not. So, think of it the same way. Why would you wait and have to pay the application fee when right now you do not have to? We focus a lot on what they're losing and also what they're gaining by pushing it within the three free application days.

These comments reflect how counselors deliberately connected the initiative to real-world financial reasoning, positioning participation as a matter of practical advantage and smart decision-making. In suburban and urban schools, counselors described how the elimination of fees reduced psychological and financial barriers, making the process more accessible even for students who could afford to pay. As the suburban counselor explained, "it removed a big

barrier, even if they could afford multiple applications,” because the fact that it was “absolutely free takes away all of the risk of applying.” This sense of value was also framed in concrete financial terms, with an urban counselor explaining that the fee-free window represented “a savings of \$200 to \$350 depending on how many schools they apply to,” equating that amount to “a car payment.”

Overall, the perceived value of Kansas Free Application Days extended beyond simple financial savings. The initiative fostered a sense of opportunity, encouraged exploration, and alleviated the financial and emotional weight often associated with application decisions. Counselors observed that when cost was removed from the equation, students applied more confidently and broadly, often expressing excitement and relief rather than hesitation. This sense of empowerment underscored the campaign’s effectiveness in transforming access into action.

Structural Barriers

Although counselor staff across all three settings expressed strong support for the Kansas Free Application Days initiative, they also identified logistical and structural challenges that influenced the scope and efficiency of implementation. These barriers were most often described in larger or urban school contexts, where staffing limitations and competing demands constrained how much individualized support could be provided during the three-day window. The rural counselor reflected on how school size shaped both communication and efficiency, noting that smaller communities benefited from stronger personal connections and coordination:

I can imagine how hard it would be in those bigger high schools, like having 450 seniors. I can only imagine that their apply free days would look so different than they look here. I empathize with those larger schools on how they manage to pull off the initiative as efficiently as we do. With our smaller numbers, I feel like we're so

blessed to be able to communicate with the parents, to have the community and parent support that we have.

This reflection highlighted the logistical advantage of smaller settings, where counselors could directly engage families and manage participation more easily. In contrast, the counselor from the urban school described how scale, scheduling, and limited staffing created ongoing challenges. The urban counselor, whose role was specialized as a college and career counselor, explained that implementation responsibilities were centralized. The counselor noted that “there’s one of me,” and that “it’s my job to ensure that this gets implemented,” which allowed other school counselors to continue focusing on their core responsibilities. While this structure supported participation, it also underscored how personnel constraints required careful coordination to balance competing priorities.

Time emerged as a consistent barrier for students as well. Urban counseling staff noted this challenge most explicitly, explaining that many students worked after school or were enrolled in demanding academic schedules, leaving limited opportunities to apply during the event. The urban counselor described the difficulty of finding time within students’ schedules:

Most students work after school, they're in classes during school, it's getting them to take or be allowed to take that hour or two out of their academic schedule to come down and do those applications. I think that's the only, I don't want to call it a barrier, but you know, it would be if a student has to leave and go to work at 4 o'clock, and they're there until midnight, and they're in all AP or IB classes. Again, it just comes down to time.

In response to these constraints, counselors described informal accommodations that allowed motivated students to participate despite limited availability. The urban counselor noted

that students often used lunch periods to apply or ask questions, explaining that “they’ll come and sit in my room at lunch and work on stuff because there’s not a lot of free time.” These accounts reveal that while Kansas Free Application Days provided valuable access opportunities, implementation was inevitably shaped by contextual realities such as staffing levels, school size, and student availability. Counselors emphasized that sustaining equitable participation required flexibility, creative scheduling, and targeted communication to ensure all students could take advantage of the opportunity.

Readiness and Facilitation

Across settings, counselors emphasized that effective participation in Kansas Free Application Days depended on schoolwide structures that intentionally supported student readiness and access. Rather than relying solely on counselor availability, schools embedded the initiative into existing systems and spaces that students regularly interacted with. These organizational choices—integrating the event into classes, leveraging advisory systems, and utilizing accessible, welcoming environments—helped normalize the application process and ensure that students had the opportunity to apply with support.

In the rural setting, readiness was facilitated through direct integration into the curriculum by holding the event within a required course:

We do it in class periods in our personal finance class that's required, so all our seniors are in there. We take a 50-minute class period and spend that class period with them. So, it's usually 4 adults to 15 students on average, and it's both counselors and then our personal finance teacher and our principal. We all make our rounds and help the students.

This structured, team-based approach made participation systematic rather than optional, reducing missed opportunities and reinforcing a shared sense of purpose among staff. In the suburban school, facilitation centered on creating accessible, high-visibility spaces within the school day. The counselor described the school library as a neutral, centrally located site that students naturally passed through, making it an effective hub for application support:

Going to the library was a very neutral site and it's just right off the academic wing, so it's really easy access and then kids pass through it during passing period all of the time. As they were going through passing period, they would stop and ask a question. We put up on the projector, what we were doing and where we were. We had pennants for them to fill out, candy, and gave them stickers.

The strength of the school's advisory program further supported readiness and access. As the suburban counselor explained, "we have a pretty strong advisory program," and many students "go directly to their advisory teachers," reinforcing a culture where teachers are "a part of the supports for students."

In the urban context, readiness was facilitated through centralized access and partnerships with higher education institutions. The counselor noted that students completed applications in a familiar space, explaining simply, "they go to my classroom." To further strengthen confidence and institutional connection, the counselor invited college admissions representatives to support students during the three-day event:

We begin with exposure, then we have our free application days. I bring in college partners because even though I came from higher ed, students see me in my role, not as the expert in higher ed. They see me as an expert but if you bring in an admissions counselor, they look at that as, oh, that institution is here for me. So, I think it's

important to bring in our partners so that our students can feel that connection again.

So, then we go through the application process over 3 days.

Together, these accounts demonstrate how readiness and facilitation were shaped by each school's structure, resources, and relationships. Whether through course integration, collaborative staff involvement, or partnerships with higher education institutions, counselors emphasized that intentional design transformed awareness into action. Kansas Free Application Days were most effective when schools embedded participation within existing systems of support, ensuring that students could apply confidently and without barriers.

Student Questionnaire

The student questionnaire provided an additional perspective on Sub-Research Question 1 by capturing students' firsthand experiences and perceptions of the Kansas Free Application Days. Whereas counselor interviews illuminated how the campaign was implemented and supported within schools, the questionnaire data offered direct insight into how students understood and engaged with the initiative. The analysis examined how students perceived the usefulness of the event, the barriers they encountered, and the extent to which cost and access influenced their application decisions.

Because each data source addressed the research questions from different analytic perspectives, the thematic structure for the student questionnaire was intentionally different than the qualitative interview coding scheme. Counselor interviews were coded through the guiding theoretical frameworks to capture implementation and advising practices, while questionnaire groupings were constructed to reflect descriptive patterns in student participation, motivation, and perceived barriers. As a result, questionnaire findings are presented collectively to capture students' overall experiences rather than organized by individual theme.

As shown in Table 4.14, student questionnaire items align closely with the four qualitative themes that emerged from the counselor interviews, reflecting shared areas of focus around financial access, procedural understanding, counselor support, motivation, and college choice.

Table 4.14

Alignment of Student Questionnaire Items with Qualitative Themes Related to Sub-Research Question 1

Theme	Related Student Questions
Awareness Drives Participation	Q1, Q2, Q5, Q9, Q10, Q11, Q13
Perceived Value	Q10, Q12, Q13, Q17
Structural Barriers	Q10, Q12, Q14, Q15, Q16
Readiness and Facilitation	Q6, Q10, Q11, Q15, Q16

The following section summarizes student responses across these survey items, complementary to the qualitative findings. Together, these data offer a more complete understanding of how students experienced Kansas Free Application Days.

Student Questionnaire Results

To further address Sub-Research Question 1—What factors influence students’ decisions to participate in the Kansas Free Application Days?—the questionnaire data were analyzed to explore patterns of participation, awareness of the campaign, and perceptions of cost and access. A total of 141 completed questionnaires were analyzed after excluding 17 incomplete responses. These findings describe the characteristics of participating students, their awareness of fee-waiver opportunities, and the motivations and barriers shaping their engagement in the campaign. Several questionnaire items aligned with both the overarching and sub-research

questions. This intentional overlap reflects the interconnected nature of students' college decision-making and participation behaviors.

Participation and Awareness

Of the 141 completed questionnaires, 101 students (72%) reported submitting an application during the Kansas Free Application Days, while 39 students (28%) did not. This strong participation rate demonstrates substantial engagement across the three participating schools. Students who did not participate may have already applied earlier in the semester or may have been uncertain about their postsecondary plans at the time of the campaign.

When asked whether they were aware that students experiencing financial hardship can apply to college for free year-round, responses varied by locale. Rural students were the most knowledgeable, with 67% indicating awareness compared to 29% of urban students and only 16% of suburban students. This variation could suggest that information about ongoing fee-waiver opportunities is not consistently communicated. While Kansas Free Application Days appeared to raise awareness temporarily, the data indicated a need for more consistent, year-round messaging about financial aid options available to students.

Before learning about the Free Application Days, 10% of respondents indicated that they either had no plans to apply to college or were unsure. These students were asked to identify their primary reasons for not planning to apply, and several interrelated factors emerged. The most frequently cited reason was the cost of application fees, followed closely by not knowing where to start and believing college was unaffordable. Other responses included lack of encouragement to apply and uncertainty about whether college was the right choice. Collectively, these findings illustrate how financial concerns, procedural confusion, and limited support networks contribute to hesitation about applying to college. The Kansas Free Application

Days initiative helped reduce many of these initial doubts by creating a structured opportunity to act, coupled with clear guidance and the removal of immediate financial barriers.

Motivation and Decision-Making

Findings from the student questionnaire reveal several key factors that influenced students' decisions to participate in the Kansas Free Application Days. The most prominent motivator was the removal of financial barriers, followed closely by encouragement from schools and the opportunity to explore more options at little or no cost. More than half of respondents (53%) reported that Kansas Free Application Days motivated them to apply to more colleges than originally planned, suggesting that when the perceived financial risk was lifted, students felt empowered to broaden their choices. In contrast, only 11% said the event did not influence their application behavior, and 4% were unsure, indicating that for a majority of students, the temporary fee elimination served as a decisive influence on participation.

When asked why they chose to apply during the campaign, 48% of students identified saving money on application fees as their primary reason for participation. Another 11% applied to explore additional college options, and an equal share (11%) indicated that encouragement from their school played a central role. These responses highlight that students were influenced by both extrinsic factors, such as financial savings, and social-environmental factors, such as counselor and teacher support. Together, these motivators underscore how Kansas Free Application Days created conditions that made applying feel both affordable and achievable.

Collectively, these findings indicate that participation in Kansas Free Application Days was driven by a combination of financial opportunity, school-based encouragement, and a reduced sense of risk associated with applying. By removing a concrete cost barrier while simultaneously fostering a supportive application environment, the campaign prompted students

who may have otherwise delayed or narrowed their applications to take meaningful steps toward their postsecondary goals.

Support and Barriers

Students' responses demonstrated that school-based structures and counselor engagement were among the most influential factors affecting decisions to participate in the Kansas Free Application Days. Nearly nine in ten respondents (89%) reported that their high school offered an event or support tied to the campaign—such as Apply Kansas workshops, in-school application sessions, or dedicated counselor assistance. These findings suggest that institutional facilitation played a central role in shaping participation: when students were provided with structured time, guidance, and encouragement, they were far more likely to take advantage of the free-application window.

Since completing college applications involves multiple procedural steps, respondents were asked to select all barriers they encountered during the application process (see Table 4.15). The most common barrier cited was unfamiliarity with the application process, followed by financial concerns beyond application fees and limited guidance or support. Smaller proportions reported logistical or technical challenges, such as obtaining transcripts or navigating online systems. These overlapping selections show that cost is only one part of a broader web of structural and informational barriers that can discourage engagement.

Table 4.15*Reported Barriers During the College Application Process*

Variable	Frequency	Percent of Total Responses*
Barrier		
No barriers encountered	60	61%
Unfamiliarity with the application process	27	28%
Financial concerns beyond application fees	14	14%
Application fees	11	11%
Lack of guidance or support	8	8%
Difficulty obtaining transcripts or recommendations	7	7%
Technical issues with applications	6	6%

Note. Percentages are based on the total number of respondents and rounded to the nearest whole number. Totals exceed 100% due to multiple responses.

To further understand what types of assistance might reduce these barriers, respondents were asked in a separate follow-up item to select which supports would have helped them engage more fully in the application process. When asked which types of support would have helped reduce barriers in the application process, students most frequently selected more support from school counselors, more information on college options, and extended deadlines for free-application windows, each selected by 45% of respondents. Because respondents could choose multiple options, these results reveal that students viewed counselor guidance, access to information, and flexibility in timing as equally critical for increasing participation. Each reflects a dimension of readiness and support that extends beyond financial considerations, emphasizing that relational and structural assistance are powerful enablers of student engagement.

The findings indicate that participation in the Kansas Free Application Days was shaped by a combination of institutional support, procedural understanding, and communication.

Schools that provided visible, counselor-led opportunities for students to complete applications translated awareness into participation, while lingering uncertainty, limited time, or lack of personalized guidance hindered engagement. Overall, these data underscore that while the removal of application fees eliminated a tangible financial barrier, students' decisions to participate were equally influenced by the availability of consistent information, counselor encouragement, and accessible application structures within their schools.

Influence on College Choice and Overall Helpfulness

Results from the student questionnaire suggest that participation in the Kansas Free Application Days was largely influenced by how students perceived the usefulness and accessibility of the initiative. Responses indicated that many students found the campaign helpful in making the college application process more approachable and affordable. The majority rated the experience as very or extremely helpful, showing that the campaign's design effectively addressed common financial and procedural challenges. Students who had already completed their applications or felt confident in their college choices before the event were less likely to report an impact, suggesting that timing and readiness also influenced participation.

When asked whether the Free Application Days affected where they applied to college, a substantial number of students indicated that the initiative influenced their decisions, often by encouraging them to apply to additional institutions. Others reported that the event did not alter their choices, implying that some had already made application decisions independent of the campaign. Responses to a related question about the potential influence of a standard application fee indicated that while many students believed a fee would not have changed their enrollment decisions, others acknowledged that it could have influenced their choice of institution. These

findings suggest that financial considerations remained a key motivator for participation, even when the perceived impact of cost varied across students.

Students' overall evaluations of Kansas Free Application Days indicate that the initiative successfully reduced barriers and encouraged engagement in the application process. Most participants rated the campaign as helpful or highly helpful, reinforcing the conclusion that the removal of application fees, coupled with a structured statewide effort, positively influenced their decisions to apply. Together these findings show that students' decisions to participate in Kansas Free Application Days were primarily influenced by financial accessibility, perceived usefulness, and individual readiness to act. Students were most likely to engage when they recognized the opportunity to apply at no cost and when the process felt manageable within their level of preparation.

Sub-Research Question 2

This section presents findings addressing the second sub research question: how do school counselors' approaches to Free Application Days inform recommendations for college access policies and practices. It examines how counselors' strategies, decision-making, and implementation practices during Kansas Free Application Days inform broader recommendations for college access policy and practice. Findings draw exclusively from qualitative interviews with counseling staff representing rural, suburban, and urban contexts. Analysis focused on how counselors organized, promoted, and sustained student participation within the unique constraints of their settings. Figure 4.6 illustrates the alignment between Sub-Research Question 2, the qualitative data source, and the themes that guided analysis of counselor approaches and policy-relevant practices.

Figure 4.6

Alignment of Sub Research Question 2, Data Source, and Themes



Across all three schools, counselors described Kansas Free Application Days as a multifaceted effort that required careful planning, adaptability, and advocacy. The impact of the initiative was closely tied to how intentionally school counseling staff structured and facilitated the campaign, rather than to the policy itself in isolation. Their reflections revealed not only how the initiative was carried out locally but also how its design and execution illuminated broader needs for policy alignment and systemic support. Three major themes emerged from the analysis: Counselor Implementation, Implementation Realities, and Advocacy for Policy Refinement. Collectively, these themes demonstrate how counselors translated a statewide policy initiative into actionable, school-based practice while navigating contextual challenges and limited resources.

The first theme, Counselor Implementation, captures the practical strategies counselors used to promote, structure, and manage the campaign, including how they allocated resources, targeted outreach, and encouraged participation. Findings indicate that when counselors intentionally embedded Free Application Days into the school day and ensured students had access to direct support and dedicated time, the initiative exerted a stronger influence on school culture and student participation. The second theme, Implementation Realities, reflects the

contextual factors that shaped how the initiative unfolded across urban, suburban, and rural schools, such as counselor caseloads, competing priorities, and variations in student engagement. The final theme, Advocacy for Policy Refinement, highlights counselors' recommendations for improving statewide coordination, extending supports beyond the campaign window, and embedding Free Application Days into existing college-and-career readiness systems. Together, these findings illustrate how school counselors served as both implementers and advocates, translating statewide policy into meaningful student experiences while identifying actionable strategies for strengthening college-access practices across Kansas.

Qualitative Interviews

School counseling staff from three Kansas high schools—representing rural, suburban, and urban settings—were interviewed to examine how they planned and implemented the Kansas Free Application Days initiative and how their experiences informed recommendations for future policy and practice. Each counselor had extensive experience in their respective school counseling staff role and direct responsibility for coordinating college and career readiness initiatives within their school. Interview questions explored how counselors structured and promoted the campaign, collaborated with colleagues and postsecondary partners, and navigated resource limitations. Analysis of the interviews revealed three interrelated themes—Counselor Implementation, Implementation Realities, and Advocacy for Policy Refinement—that collectively highlight both the strengths of school-level execution and the areas where statewide coordination could be refined to improve equity and sustainability.

Counselor Implementation

Across all three participating schools, counseling staff demonstrated a strategic and intentional approach to implementing Kansas Free Application Days. Although methods

reflected each school's context, size, and student population, counselors shared a unified emphasis on access, communication, and coordinated logistics. The initiative's impact was strongest in settings where counselors assumed clear leadership over implementation and structured participation as an inclusive, schoolwide experience rather than an optional activity. Across settings, implementation relied on layered outreach strategies, including classroom presentations, targeted emails, announcements, and parent communication, alongside structures that allowed students to complete applications with direct support. The rural counselor described beginning outreach early in the school year, initially connecting with families during senior orientation and then sustaining communication through regular email updates beginning in mid-September.

Similarly, the suburban counselor emphasized family-facing communication, noting that they hosted a "how to apply to college webinar" because, despite a strong college going culture, "there are still quite a few families that are just absolutely clueless." The urban counselor described saturating the school environment with information, explaining that "it's on the announcements, they've got the flyers, it's been sent to the parents," and that participation "becomes a part of our community... everywhere within this building."

Counselors also described how student engagement was strengthened when events were structured to be inclusive and visible to all students, while allowing opportunities for individual guidance when needed. Peer participation and counselor accessibility were repeatedly identified as central to engagement. In rural settings, counselors noted that the shared, collective nature of the event helped normalize questions about the application process, reducing hesitation and encouraging students to seek help alongside their peers.

In the suburban setting, this same dynamic contributed to a building-wide sense of momentum. As the suburban counselor described:

It was very much a thing. That's what we were doing that day, for those three days. It was very much the buzz. I walked into a comp class just to chat with the teacher, and they were all like, 'I'm applying today! I'm applying today! I'm applying today, too!'

Beyond communication and engagement, counselors discussed how they allocated time, space, technology, and staffing to facilitate participation, with logistical decisions reflecting thoughtful adaptation to local conditions. The rural counselor explained how embedding application support into a required course ensured universal access and manageable adult-to-student ratios:

We do it during class periods in our required personal finance class, so all of our seniors participate. We take a 50-minute class period and spend that time working with them. It's usually about four adults to fifteen students on average then both counselors, our personal finance teacher, and my principal. We all make our rounds and help the students. They usually finish within the class period, and then I say, 'Let's go for more, let's do another one!'

In contrast, the urban counselor emphasized the importance of leveraging external partnerships to increase student confidence and perceived institutional support:

I bring in college partners because, even though I came from higher ed, students see me in my role, not as the expert in higher ed. They see me as an expert, but when you bring in an admissions counselor, they look at that as, 'Oh, that institution is here for me.' So, I think it's important to bring in our partners so that our students can feel that connection.

In the suburban context, facilitation emphasized visibility, accessibility, and atmosphere as tools for engagement. By situating application support in a familiar, frequently used space, counselors created opportunities for spontaneous questions, peer modeling, and sustained momentum throughout the day. Across contexts, counselors emerged as both organizers and advocates—creating conditions that normalized college-application completion and reduced friction for students across diverse contexts. Their approaches combined promotional persistence, relational outreach, and logistical oversight, providing a foundation for the subsequent themes that examine the realities, challenges, and policy implications of implementing Kansas Free Application Days.

Implementation Realities

The realities of implementation varied considerably across rural, suburban, and urban contexts. While all counseling staff expressed strong support for Kansas Free Application Days, the magnitude of impact depended on how fully the initiative was integrated into existing school structures and whether students were provided dedicated time and access to direct assistance. Contextual factors such as counselor caseloads, student demographics, available resources, and local expectations regarding college going culture shaped how the initiative unfolded.

In the rural context, the counselor emphasized the advantages of a mid-size school, noting that smaller scale allowed for stronger relationships and more persistent follow-up with students who had not yet applied:

I feel like it's such a blessing to be a steady, stable mid-size high school. We have enough students that everyone feels like they have a place to belong, but we're also small enough that we know them well and can be persistent with follow-up if they don't apply somewhere. I can only imagine how challenging it would be in larger

high schools with 450 seniors, the Apply Free Days would look so different than they do here.

In contrast, the suburban counselor described managing a significantly larger caseload, explaining that while full participation would have strained capacity, student independence helped mitigate resource limitations:

We have 1,100 students, and we're split down the middle, so I have about 350 on my caseload. Our ratio is 1 to 350. If every single senior had participated, I would say no, it wouldn't have worked. But many of them are able to do most of the process on their own, so I don't feel like we had any major issues with resources or staffing.

In the urban setting, implementation relied on role specialization, with the counseling staff explaining that centralized responsibility allowed other school counselors to continue focusing on their core duties: "There's just one of me," they noted, adding that ensuring implementation was "my responsibility." Counselors also described differences in student engagement that reflected school culture and peer influence. In the rural school, the counselor described how collective participation generated momentum, noting that when students worked together, a sense of shared accountability emerged:

When they're doing it on their own and not collectively, it can turn into, 'I'll do it tomorrow... I'll do it tomorrow... I don't think I'm going to do it... I never did do that.' So, there's that impetus to keep up with the Joneses, 'My classmates are all doing this, so I'm going to apply too.' There's a momentum that gets created, and the whole building felt it. The celebrations were immense. They wore those 'I Applied' stickers proudly, and when they went to their next class, the teacher would ask,

‘Where did you apply?’ They’d share where they applied, and that would lead to,
‘Have you thought about this place?’ ‘No, but I could apply there too.’

In the suburban context, the counselor similarly attributed participation to social norms, explaining that applying became part of the day’s shared experience: “It was just the culture, it was 100% because everyone was doing it.” In the urban setting, the counselor described how time constraints shaped student behavior, noting that students often used informal opportunities to participate, explaining that they would “come and sit in my room at lunch and work on stuff,” which also led to competitive conversations about admissions outcomes.

Several rural examples illustrated how this collective culture translated into meaningful student outcomes. The rural counselor further described how participation extended to students who might otherwise have disengaged, emphasizing that the celebration surrounding the event made application feel attainable and inclusive:

The free application week was moving. You couldn’t be in this building and not be part of the celebration, every kid, every walk of life. I have one student who was in and out of foster care for most of high school and is now back at home this year as a senior, and he’s rocking it. He very easily could have been a dropout easily, easily, easily, and he’s having a fantastic year. He applied without question.

The counselor further shared how students sought affirmation and connection during the process, noting that one student waited outside the office simply to share acceptance news because of how excited they were. Despite this enthusiasm, counselors acknowledged implementation challenges related to time, competing priorities, and student workload. In the urban context, time constraints were described as the most significant limiting factor. The counselor emphasized the challenge of carving out protected time during the school day, noting that participation often

depended on whether students could step away from academic demands long enough to complete applications. When students carried heavy course loads, even short interruptions became difficult, reinforcing that successful participation ultimately came down to aligning application support with the realities of students' daily schedules and competing obligations. Similarly, the rural counselor described difficulty balancing competing demands, noting that supporting students often required setting aside other responsibilities:

At any given period of the day, there are three, four, or five students every hour who need something. It's very difficult to prioritize what's most important because they're all important, and they're all important to each student and family. I sometimes struggle with knowing exactly where my time needs to be devoted at different points in the day. Most of what I come into the school day needing to get done doesn't get done. I might check off two things on a list of twelve.

The suburban counselor reiterated that capacity was sufficient only because not all students required intensive support, again noting that full participation would have been difficult to sustain.

Despite these challenges, all three counselors expressed strong confidence in their ability to guide students effectively through the application process. The rural counselor emphasized professional humility and help-seeking, explaining that they were "never afraid to admit" when they did not know something and were willing to ask questions. The suburban counselor linked confidence to personal experience, noting that navigating the process with their own children deepened both skill and commitment. The urban counselor emphasized technical expertise, noting that having experience working in a higher education admissions department allowed them to understand how admissions decisions are made and what institutions are looking for.

Collectively, these excerpts illustrate that implementation realities were shaped by school context and counselor capacity but strengthened by professional confidence and student-centered commitment. Each counselor navigated competing demands and varying levels of student readiness while maintaining focus on the campaign's goal, ensuring students had equitable access to college application opportunities.

Advocacy for Policy Refinement

"This is good stuff, this is where it's at," the rural counselor emphasized, explaining that anyone who visited a high school during Free Application Days could immediately see the impact, noting that "not a single person would argue with it." This emphatic endorsement set the tone across all three settings, where counselors described Kansas Free Application Days as part of a broader, year-round strategy to promote equitable college access. Their reflections revealed both policy-level and practice-level recommendations designed to sustain momentum, strengthen communication, and embed the initiative within existing postsecondary planning efforts.

Counselors consistently emphasized that the campaign's success depends on its integration with other statewide college access efforts. Rather than functioning in isolation, Kansas Free Application Days were described as a natural extension of the Apply Kansas framework, connecting seamlessly with FAFSA completion events and senior signing activities that follow later in the school year. Each counselor viewed this continuity as essential for reinforcing a structured, step-by-step pathway to postsecondary enrollment.

In the rural context, the counselor emphasized how their Apply Kansas application completion event laid the foundation for Free Application Days, explaining that the platform "broke down all those barriers" and resulted in nearly all students being accepted to at least one institution, with many accepted to multiple schools. Through Apply Kansas, the counselor noted,

students were able to ask questions that often “stump our kids and their families,” allowing the counselor to respond quickly and confidently.

Similarly, the urban counselor described sequencing Apply Kansas early in the fall, noting that beginning with a college and career fair helped students enter Free Application Days with greater clarity. By the time the fee-free window occurred, students “remember who they’ve met with” and were prepared to generate a list of institutions to which they wanted to apply. The suburban counselor echoed this perspective, reflecting that the Apply Kansas initiative has increased communication and understanding of the application process, noting that what seemed like “common sense” was not actually intuitive for many families. Counselors also emphasized the importance of pacing and timing across the senior year. The rural counselor stressed the urgency of maintaining forward momentum, reminding students that by mid-October “you’re going to run out of time” if students procrastinate and emphasizing the need to stay on track to complete the FAFSA.

In addition to aligning Free Application Days with other initiatives, counselors emphasized maintaining the program’s structure, timing, and visibility to preserve statewide consistency. The rural counselor acknowledged that while an extended window might seem beneficial, “those three days push the issue,” explaining that if the event were open longer, schools could “lose some momentum.” From the urban perspective, consistency was essential for institutional planning, with the counselor emphasizing that Free Application Days should mirror FAFSA’s predictable October timeline to help faculty anticipate the event and ensure nothing was missed.

Counselors also emphasized that the campaign’s structure served as an important behavioral framework for students. The rural counselor described the initiative as providing

“guardrails,” noting that clear boundaries helped students thrive by narrowing focus and reducing ambiguity in the application process. Similarly, the suburban counselor explained that a defined application window gave students “a set time to actually think about it,” preventing procrastination and helping establish a shared culture among students, that “this is the time to focus” on application completion postsecondary planning.

Together, these accounts demonstrated how Free Application Days function most effectively when integrated within the rhythm of a school’s college going culture. Counselors described structuring the campaign to align with pre-existing initiatives such as Apply Kansas, FAFSA completion events, senior signing days, and even local college fairs. This sequencing provided predictability and reduced fragmentation in postsecondary planning. The rural counselor embedded the campaign within a required personal finance class, ensuring every senior participated; the suburban counselor held an event in the library to increase visibility and normalize participation; and the urban counselor coordinated district-wide efforts that built from early fall exposure to colleges during their high school’s college fair. Embedding the initiative within these existing structures created a seamless transition across stages of the college going process and strengthened schoolwide commitment to participation.

Counselors also stressed that intentional follow-through was vital to sustaining impact after the application window closed. Several described how the same excitement generated during the three days could be leveraged to prompt FAFSA completion, scholarship applications, and acceptance celebrations. These practices underscored that Kansas Free Application Days function not as a standalone event, but as a catalyst embedded within a scaffolded sequence of college-access activities.

From the suburban perspective, the counselor emphasized how the policy addressed a frequently overlooked financial barrier, describing the initiative as “incredible and honestly genius,” noting that making applications free “makes all the difference in the world” for families managing multiple college applications. Recalling personal experience, the counselor explained that paying “\$60 times four colleges” had not been budgeted for, reinforcing how eliminating fees expands access and students’ sense of possibility.

Collectively, these reflections suggest that sustaining Kansas Free Application Days as a permanent, consistent statewide initiative is central to its success. Counselors viewed the policy as not only a financial access mechanism but also a behavioral structure that anchors the college going process. Their insights indicate that future policy refinement should prioritize predictable scheduling, early dissemination of information to schools, and continued coordination with college-access partners. The campaign’s influence extends beyond reducing costs; it establishes shared expectations and a cohesive framework supporting equitable participation in postsecondary education across Kansas.

Overall Findings

This section synthesizes findings from the qualitative interviews and student questionnaire to address the overarching research question and sub research questions. Together, results from both data sources indicate that Kansas Free Application Days influenced students’ willingness to apply to college, the number of applications submitted, and the range of institutions considered. Findings also illustrate how school counselors’ implementation strategies and local contextual conditions shaped the reach and effectiveness of the initiative. Collectively, results demonstrate that participation in Kansas Free Application Days was driven by financial

access, procedural support, counselor encouragement, and the structure and timing of the campaign.

Figure 4.7

Organization of Findings

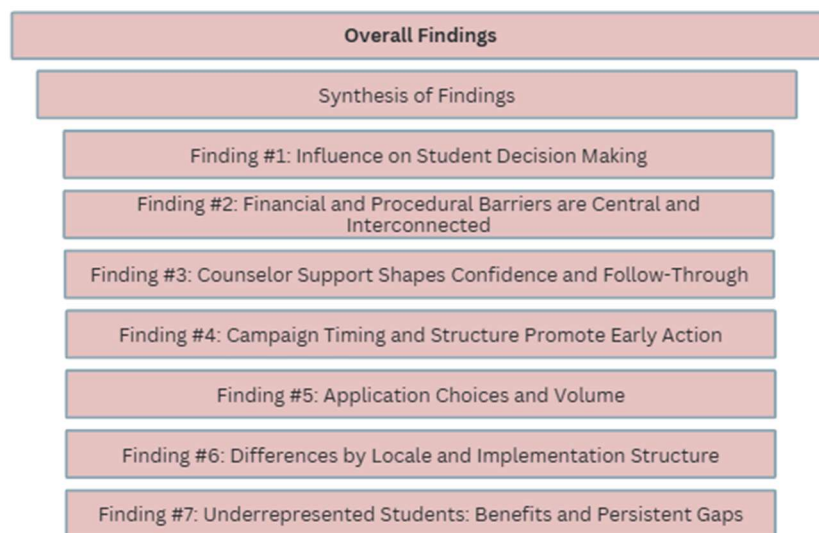


Figure 4.7 provides a visual roadmap of the integrated findings and illustrates how student- and counselor-level results are organized across the overarching and sub research questions. These integrated findings clarify what motivated student participation and how counselor implementation shaped campaign effectiveness. Student engagement was influenced by awareness, financial benefit, school based structure, and counselor encouragement. At the same time, counselors' decisions regarding scheduling, alignment with FAFSA and Apply Kansas efforts, and coordination with admissions partners directly affected participation levels and informed recommendations for statewide refinement. Overall, results demonstrate how

financial access, procedural support, and local implementation design interact to influence student application behavior.

Finding #1: Influence on Student Decision-Making

Across data sources, Kansas Free Application Days encouraged students to apply earlier, apply more broadly, and, for some students, apply when they otherwise would not have. While most students already planned to pursue college, the campaign influenced both the timing and the scope of their application behavior. Approximately 10% of students were undecided or not planning to apply before learning about the free application window, and many in this group reported that the campaign prompted them to take action. More than half of students also reported applying to more colleges than originally planned because of the initiative. Counselors described similar shifts, noting that fee removal and structured support encouraged students to view the application process as an opportunity rather than a financial risk. As a result, the initiative increased participation and expanded students' sense of possibility, prompting many to explore options that had previously felt out of reach.

Figure 4.8

Integrated Themes Supporting Finding #1

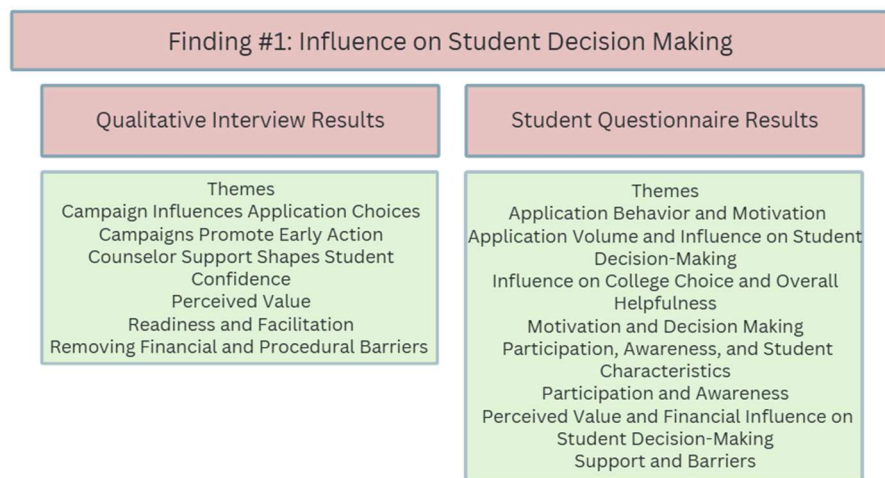


Figure 4.8 synthesizes integrated themes from the student questionnaire and counselor interviews, illustrating how Kansas Free Application Days influenced student decision-making related to application timing, scope, and willingness to apply.

Finding #2: Financial and Procedural Barriers Are Central and Interconnected

Removing financial and procedural barriers emerged as the most significant factor influencing participation. Counselors consistently described application fees and confusion about the application process as intertwined challenges. Students reflected this same pattern, identifying cost and uncertainty about how to begin as the most common reasons for initial hesitation. Even modest application fees influenced student choices, with nearly half of respondents indicating that a typical \$40–\$50 application fee could have changed where they decided to enroll. Kansas Free Application Days helped alleviate these pressures by eliminating immediate costs and providing structured opportunities for students to practice the application process, thereby building knowledge and confidence simultaneously.

Figure 4.9

Integrated Themes Supporting Finding #2

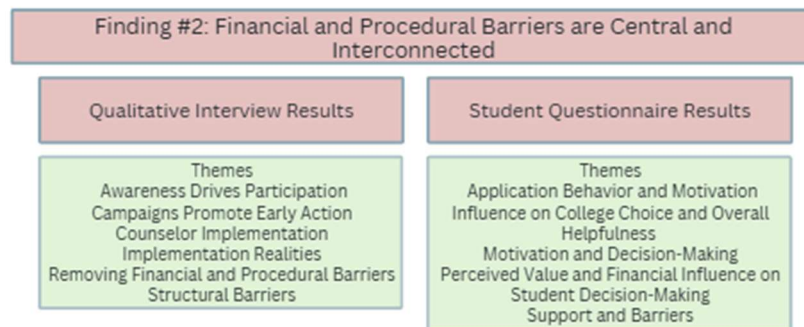


Figure 4.9 synthesizes integrated themes from the student questionnaire and counselor interviews, illustrating how financial and procedural barriers functioned as interconnected obstacles rather than separate challenges.

Finding #3: Counselor Support Shapes Confidence and Follow-Through

Counselor involvement played a critical role in translating opportunity into action. Students rated counselor support and school-led events as among the most helpful aspects of the campaign, and a vast majority reported receiving dedicated support or participating in an event tied to Free Application Days. Interview data illustrated how relational trust, individualized coaching, and visible counselor presence reduced hesitation and increased students' self-efficacy to apply. Counselors described students becoming excited and more confident as they received acceptance notifications and recognized that college was within reach.

Figure 4.10

Integrated Themes Supporting Finding #3

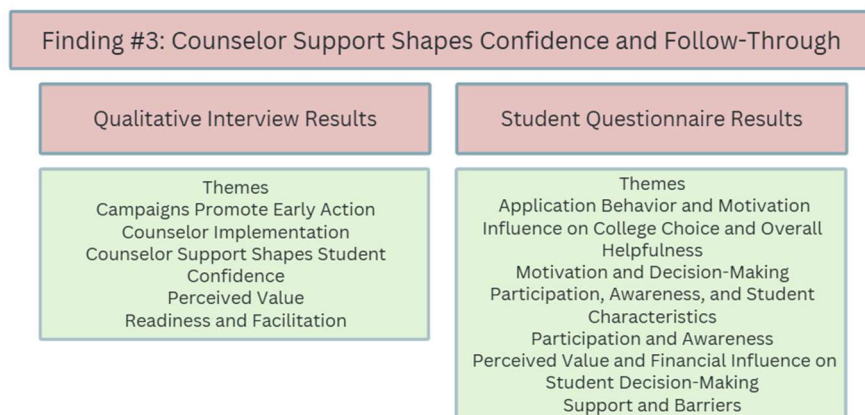


Figure 4.10 synthesizes integrated themes from the student questionnaire and counselor interviews, illustrating how counselor support and school-based relationships shaped student confidence, motivation, and follow-through. These relational dynamics reinforced the broader influence of school culture on participation.

Finding #4: Campaign Timing and Structure Promote Early Action

The timing and limited window of Kansas Free Application Days encouraged students to apply earlier than they otherwise might have. Counselors across rural, suburban, and urban contexts described the three-day structure as creating a sense of urgency that helped reduce procrastination and prompted students to prioritize completing applications in early October. Although students did not explicitly reference timing as a motivator, their behavior reflected strong engagement within the designated window. Most students applied during the Free Application Days, citing the fee-free period or school-based encouragement as key reasons for participating. Many also reported that the initiative motivated them to apply to more colleges

than originally planned.

Figure 4.11

Integrated Themes Supporting Finding #4

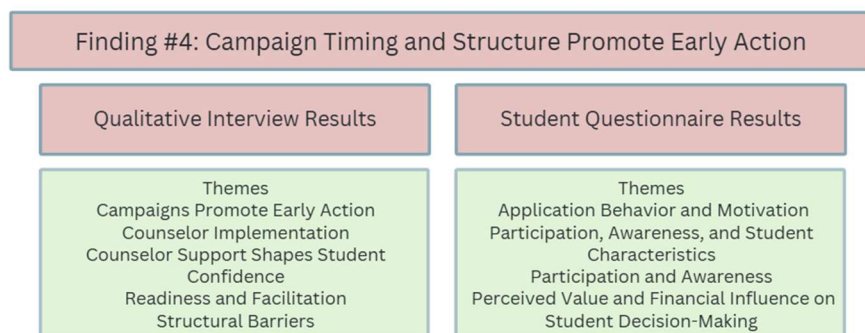


Figure 4.11 synthesizes integrated themes from the student questionnaire and counselor interviews, illustrating how campaign timing and structured implementation prompted early action and application completion across school contexts. Together, these patterns suggest that the structured campaign window, combined with visible school-based support, prompted students to take action during the designated days, aligning with counselor reports that Free Application Days functioned as a catalyst for application completion.

Finding #5: Application Choices and Volume

The initiative influenced not only whether students applied, but where they applied and how many applications they submitted. Over one-third of surveyed students reported that Kansas Free Application Days influenced their application or enrollment decisions. Counselors described some students applying to a broader range of institutions, including those previously perceived as financially unattainable, because the fee-free window reduced the perceived risk of applying. Implementation design also played an important role. Rural students applied to more

colleges because the event was embedded within a required class period, providing all seniors with time, structure, and support. In suburban and urban settings, where participation was more optional or where students already qualified for year-round fee waivers, application volume increased but to a lesser extent.

Figure 4.12

Integrated Themes Supporting Finding #5

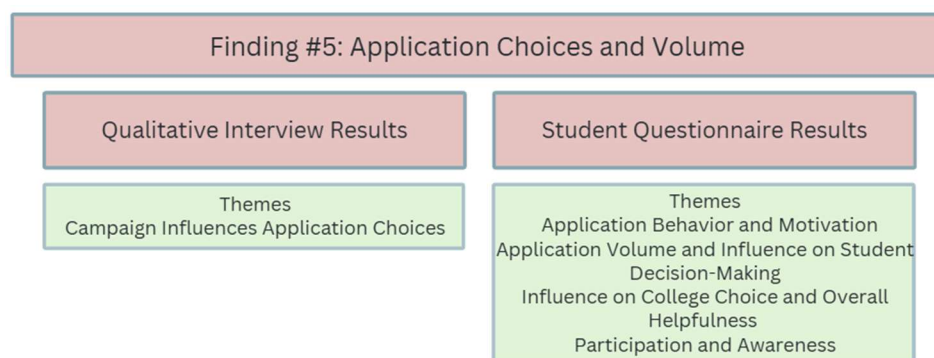


Figure 4.12 synthesizes integrated themes from the student questionnaire and counselor interviews, illustrating how application choice and volume varied by implementation structure and perceived financial risk. These patterns suggest that the delivery model can amplify or moderate the impact of statewide policy.

Finding #6: Differences by Locale and Implementation Structure

School context strongly shaped how Kansas Free Application Days were experienced by students. The rural implementation model, which embedded participation within a required personal finance class, resulted in nearly universal participation and higher rates of multiple applications. Suburban implementation relied on an optional library event, creating strong visibility and enthusiasm but not expanding application volume to the same degree. In the urban

setting, where many students were already eligible for year-round waivers, the campaign served more as a structured deadline than a financial incentive, though it still prompted some students to apply or submit additional applications.

Figure 4.13

Integrated Themes Supporting Finding #6

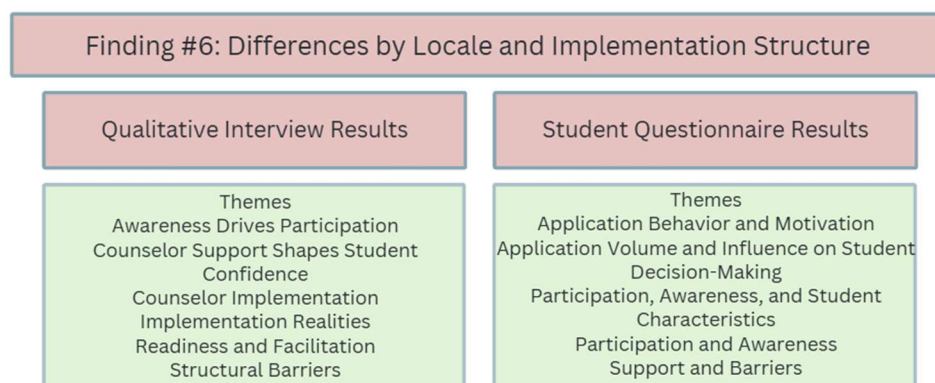


Figure 4.13 synthesizes the integrated themes from student questionnaire data and counselor interviews, illustrating how differences in locale and implementation structure shaped participation patterns and application behaviors across school contexts. These distinctions highlight that statewide initiatives are most effective when paired with school structures that provide dedicated time and personalized support.

Finding #7: Underrepresented Students: Benefits and Persistent Gaps

Students identifying as first generation and or students of color reported meaningful benefits from the campaign but also highlighted ongoing equity gaps. Many were unaware of year-round fee-waiver opportunities, and unfamiliarity with how to apply remained a major barrier. Financial savings were especially influential for this group, with cost considerations

shaping where students felt able to apply or enroll. At the same time, students in this subgroup rated the initiative as highly helpful, indicating that Kansas Free Application Days functions as a high-impact strategy for historically underserved populations.

Figure 4.14

Integrated Themes Supporting Finding #7

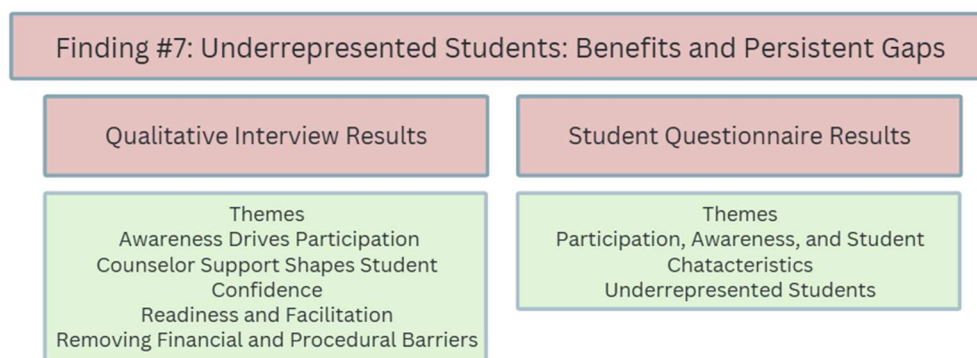


Figure 4.14 synthesizes the integrated themes from both the student questionnaire and counselor interviews that support this finding, illustrating how financial relief, procedural support, and gaps in awareness intersect for underrepresented students. Still, persistent gaps in awareness, procedural knowledge, and year-round communication signal a need for more targeted outreach and sustained support beyond the three-day window.

Synthesis Conclusion

Overall, the findings indicate that Kansas Free Application Days influence students' decisions to apply to college by removing reducing financial barriers, increasing awareness of application opportunities, and providing structured, school-based guidance. Across data sources, students' participation was shaped by clear communication, the perceived financial benefit of waived fees, and the extent to which schools embedded the initiative within existing college

going structures. Counselor implementation practices played a critical role, particularly when events were integrated into the school day, aligned with Apply Kansas and FAFSA timelines, and supported through partnerships with postsecondary institutions.

While the initiative was effective across contexts, its impact was amplified in schools that embedded participation within existing structures and provided in-school support. For many students, particularly those who are underrepresented, the three-day window created an accessible entry point into the college application process, reduced procedural uncertainty, and broadened the institutions they considered. Building on these findings, Chapter 5 shifts from description to interpretation by synthesizing results across data sources to explain how and why Kansas Free Application Days functioned as a college-access intervention.

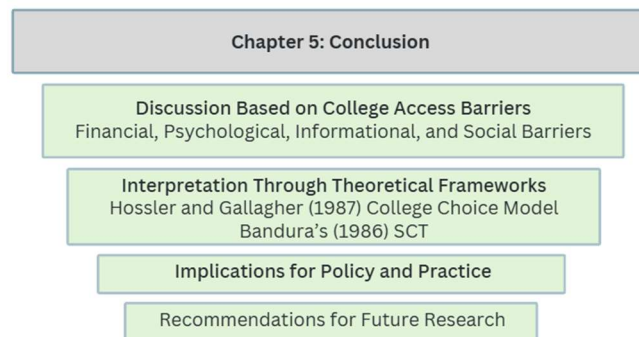
Chapter 5 - Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

This chapter synthesizes and interprets the findings presented in Chapter 4 to explain how Kansas Free Application Days influenced students' decisions to apply to college and how school-level structures, counselor practices, and statewide coordination shaped participation across contexts. Building on integrated findings from qualitative interviews and student questionnaire data, this chapter focuses on understanding the mechanisms through which the initiative functioned as a college-access intervention.

The discussion first interpreted findings through a college access barriers framework, examining how financial, procedural, informational, psychological, and social factors influenced student application behavior. Findings were then situated within Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model and Bandura's (1986) SCT to explain how Kansas Free Application Days shaped student movement through key decision-making phases and strengthened self-efficacy through structured support and peer influence. The chapter concludes with implications for policy and practice, recommendations for future research, and reflections on the broader significance of statewide free application campaigns. Figure 5.1 provides a visual roadmap of Chapter 5, illustrating how the discussion, theoretical interpretation, and implications are conceptually connected.

Figure 5.1

Conceptual Roadmap of Chapter 5



Discussion

The purpose of this discussion is to interpret the major findings of the study and explain how they contribute to a deeper understanding of how Kansas Free Application Days influence student application behavior. This section situates the findings within the broader college access literature, applies relevant theoretical frameworks to illuminate their meaning, and examines the school-level and statewide structures that shape student participation. By interpreting the results through the lens of financial, informational, psychological, and social college access barriers, this discussion clarifies the mechanisms through which Kansas Free Application Days affect students' decisions to apply to college. Table 5.1 maps the study's seven findings with the four college access barriers to illustrate how each barrier was experienced and mitigated through the initiative. For the purposes of this discussion, procedural barriers are conceptualized as a component of informational barriers, reflecting students' ability to understand and navigate application processes, while school-level structures are examined as contextual conditions that mediate how barriers are experienced and reduced. The findings align with Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) College Choice Model, as the barriers identified influenced students across the predisposition, search, and choice stages of college decision making. In addition, the results

reflect principles of SCT (Bandura, 1986) as school counselors, peer influence, and school support structures shaped students' confidence and follow through in the application process. This alignment illustrates that while individual findings emphasized distinct mechanisms, most findings intersected multiple barriers, underscoring the layered nature of students' application decisions.

Table 5.1

Alignment of Findings with College Access Barriers

Findings	College Access Barriers			
	Financial	Informational	Psychological	Social
Finding #1: Influence on Student Decision-Making	✓	✓	✓	
Finding #2: Financial and Procedural Barriers Are Central and Interconnected	✓	✓		
Finding #3: Counselor Support Shapes Confidence and Follow-Through		✓	✓	✓
Finding #4: Campaign Timing and Structure Promote Early Action		✓	✓	✓
Finding #5: Application Choices and Volume	✓		✓	✓
Finding #6: Differences by Locale and Implementation Structure	✓	✓		✓
Finding #7: Underrepresented Students: Benefits and Persistent Gaps	✓	✓	✓	✓

An important contribution of this study is its documentation of how Kansas has developed a coordinated statewide model for reducing college application barriers. Unlike many states where application fee waivers occur intermittently or are institution-specific, Kansas has implemented a structured campaign that combines statewide coordination through its higher education system, KBOR, with school-based implementation through Kansas high schools.

This coordinated approach positions Kansas as an emerging example of how states can move beyond isolated access initiatives toward system-level strategies that align policy, institutional participation, and school-level implementation. The findings from this study suggest that statewide coordination provides critical infrastructure that enables schools to normalize college application behavior and integrate application completion support into existing college going activities.

Financial and Procedural Barriers

Financial and procedural barriers played a central role in shaping whether and where students applied to college. Counselors in all three schools described application fees as a persistent deterrent, particularly for families whose incomes exceeded need-based fee waiver thresholds yet still experienced financial strain. Student questionnaire data supported this perception. Nearly three quarters of respondents applied during Kansas Free Application Days, and almost half reported that saving money on application fees was their primary motivation for participating.

These patterns aligned closely with prior research that identified application fees as a meaningful barrier, especially for low-income, first generation, and underrepresented students (Abourezk-Pinkstone, 2024; Becker, 2018; Smith et al., 2014). Scholars have shown that even modest expenses can narrow the set of institutions students consider and may cause them to avoid higher cost or more selective options, even when academically qualified (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). By temporarily removing this financial risk, Kansas Free Application Days allowed students to treat applications as opportunities rather than commitments and encouraged them to keep multiple postsecondary doors open.

The study also revealed that procedural barriers were deeply intertwined with financial ones. School counseling staff described realizing they often overestimated what students knew about the application process and were reminded that students needed explicit guidance on basic steps, such as where to begin, how to answer questions, and how to submit applications online. Students who initially did not plan to apply to college cited not knowing where to start, cost concerns, and doubts about affordability as their most common barriers. These patterns echoed findings that informational and procedural complexity suppress application and enrollment, even for academically capable students (Avery & Kane, 2004; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Roderick et al., 2011). In this study, the three-day campaign provided a concentrated window in which counselors could teach the process, answer questions in real time, and demystify college applications for students and families.

Psychological Barriers and the Role of Counselor Support

Psychological barriers, particularly students' confidence and perceived ability to navigate the application process, were strongly shaped by counselor support. The urban school counseling staff described the three-day period as a time when they were the most wanted person in the building, as students sought reassurance, procedural guidance, and encouragement. Students themselves identified more support from school counselors as one of the three most helpful strategies for further reducing barriers. These findings confirmed prior research that documented the importance of sustained, individualized advising in promoting application and enrollment, particularly for students who lack family-based college knowledge (Bryan et al., 2011; Castleman & Goodman, 2015; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). In this study, counselors not only provided information but also created conditions in which students felt comfortable asking questions and admitting what they did not know. Many students needed validation that they were

capable of succeeding in postsecondary education. Receiving early acceptances, even at one institution, appeared to increase student self-efficacy.

Bandura's (1986) SCT helps explain these patterns. Counselor interactions served as sources of verbal support and guided practice, two key mechanisms through which self-efficacy is strengthened. When students successfully completed applications with support, they experienced mastery experiences that increased their confidence for future postsecondary tasks, such as completing the FAFSA or applying for scholarships. The campaign, therefore, did more than eliminate fees. It created a structured context in which school counselors could leverage existing relationships to foster the beliefs and skills that students need to act on postsecondary aspirations.

Informational and Structural Barriers

Informational barriers related to timing, deadlines, and process clarity were reduced through the structured design of Kansas Free Application Days. Counselors across rural, suburban, and urban contexts emphasized that the three-day window created urgency and a clear deadline. Rather than delaying applications until late in the year, students were encouraged to focus on postsecondary planning early in the fall, which positioned them to meet scholarship and housing deadlines and to complete the FAFSA in a timely manner. The literature shows that timing and deadlines are powerful levers in college access interventions. Castleman and Page (2014, 2015) found that well-timed reminders and supports increased college enrollment and reduced summer melt. Similarly, Bettinger et al. (2012) demonstrated that immediate, hands-on assistance with FAFSA completion produced significant gains in college attendance. This study added to this evidence by illustrating that a statewide, time-limited campaign can serve as a calendar anchor for school-based college-planning efforts. When aligned with other initiatives

such as Apply Kansas and FAFSA completion events, Free Application Days helped structure a sequence of postsecondary tasks that moved students through the search and choice phases more efficiently (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Social Barriers, Peer Influence, and College Application Behavior

Social barriers, such as peer norms and perceived social risks, influenced both the quantity and types of applications students submitted during Kansas Free Application Days. These factors reshaped social norms and highlighted gaps in the knowledge that schools and counselors often assumed students already had. Counselors described how the visibility of the campaign and the collective nature of applying alongside peers reduced hesitation and encouraged students to submit applications they might not have otherwise considered submitting. For some students, observing peers navigate the application process made it clear that their own uncertainty was shared rather than individual, lowering the social risk of asking questions or seeking help. Many counselors described students who used the free days to apply to more institutions than they otherwise would have, including colleges they initially perceived as financially out of reach. Student questionnaire data indicated that more than half of respondents applied to more colleges than originally planned, and over one third reported that the initiative influenced where they applied or enrolled.

These patterns align with research demonstrating that social context and peer behavior play a critical role in shaping students' college choice processes, particularly when students lack college knowledge and rely on peers and school-based support to interpret the process (Bryan et al., 2011; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010). Lowering cost and procedural complexity within a shared, schoolwide event expanded the range of institutions students considered and reduced patterns of undermatch, where academically qualified students enroll in less selective or less resourced

colleges (Abourezk-Pinkstone, 2024; Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Becker, 2018; Smith et al., 2014). In this study, students in all three contexts used the fee-free window to keep options open and compare offers, even if most ultimately applied to a modest number of institutions overall.

At the same time, about half of students reported that a standard application fee of \$40 to \$50 would have influenced where they enrolled, while the other half believed it would not have changed their decision. This split suggested that while Free Application Days altered the choice set for many students, others were guided more by preexisting preferences. The initiative, therefore, did not fully override structural and social forces documented in the literature, but it did create additional opportunities for students to explore options that might otherwise have been dismissed for financial reasons (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016).

Variation Across School Contexts and Equity

Variation in school context was highly consequential in shaping how students experienced Kansas Free Application Days. These contextual differences shaped how financial, informational, psychological, and social barriers were reduced across settings. Although all three participating schools demonstrated commitment to supporting college going, their structures, staffing models, and implementation decisions led to distinct patterns in student engagement. The rural school embedded the campaign within a required personal finance class, which ensured universal participation and guaranteed that every senior had intentional time and direct support from trusted adults. Rural students were more likely to apply to multiple institutions.

The suburban school held the event in the library as an optional opportunity, creating a structure in which participation remained strong but largely aligned with students' preexisting plans. Many students used the fee-free days to follow through on intended applications rather than expand their options. In contrast, the urban school served a student population with a high

percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced price lunch, where need-based fee waivers were already familiar and widely used prior to the free application days. As a result, the three-day campaign functioned more as a deadline and a shared schoolwide event than as a major financial catalyst for application behavior. Students' ability to participate during the school day was also shaped by competing academic demands, work schedules, and large school size.

School staffing structures further shaped these contextual differences. The urban school employed a specialized college and career readiness professional whose primary responsibility focused on postsecondary advising. Unlike traditional school counselors who balance academic scheduling, personal and social support, testing coordination, and various responsibilities, this specialist could devote dedicated time to navigating applications, interpreting fee waiver processes, learning institution-specific information, and assisting with FAFSA-related questions. The college and career readiness professional's depth of postsecondary knowledge and focused role strengthened the school's capacity to assist students around college and career readiness.

In contrast, the rural school, though mid-sized within the state, benefited from counselors who knew students and families personally, often over multiple years. This relational connectedness allowed counselors to anticipate which students needed encouragement, which families required additional communication, and when individual follow-up was necessary. Combined with the decision to embed application completion within a required class, the rural school's structure created an environment where students were more likely to ask questions, seek clarification early, and apply more broadly. While rural counselors did not have the same specialization as their urban counterpart, the strength of their relationships and integration within the school day proved to be powerful supports.

Together, these structural differences demonstrate that statewide initiatives operate through the conditions and capacities of local schools. Kansas Free Application Days expanded access across all three settings, but the degree to which students benefitted depended on staffing models, scheduling decisions, counselor responsibilities, and the socioeconomic context of the school community. These findings echo prior research showing that school-based resources and counseling structures significantly influence college going opportunities (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Perna, 2006). They also reinforce concerns about equity: students living in different parts of the state, or even in neighboring districts, may receive markedly different levels of support simply because of local variations in staffing, structure, or implementation. As a result, the initiative reduced some barriers but did not fully equalize access, underscoring the need for coordinated guidance and supports that help all schools deliver consistent, high-quality application assistance. The differences by locale illustrate that while statewide policies can reduce financial barriers broadly, local implementation structures determine the extent to which informational, psychological, and social barriers are mitigated. Understanding these contextual differences is critical to scale college access initiatives across diverse school systems.

Interpretation of Findings Through Theoretical Frameworks

This section interprets the study's findings through the lenses of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college choice and Bandura's (1986) SCT. While earlier sections of Chapter 5 discussed the findings and college access barriers in relation to prior literature, the purpose of this section is to explain how and why Kansas Free Application Days influenced student decision-making by situating those findings within established theoretical frameworks. The overarching research question guiding this study asked how Free Application Campaigns influence students' decisions to apply to college. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase

model of college choice—predisposition, search, and choice—provides a meaningful lens for interpreting the findings of this study. Their framework describes college choice as a developmental process shaped by aspirations, information gathering, and final decision-making. Findings from counselor interviews and the student questionnaire align closely with this model and illustrate how Kansas Free Application Days influenced students’ attitudes, behaviors, and application choices. Viewed through this lens, Kansas Free Application Days functioned as a structured policy intervention that reduced barriers and supported student movement across phases of the college-choice process.

Predisposition Phase

The predisposition phase refers to the earliest stage of college choice, when students form general aspirations about whether college is desirable, attainable, or relevant to their futures (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). In this study, Kansas Free Application Days, supported by Apply Kansas initiatives, played a meaningful role in shaping these early perceptions. Although most surveyed students intended to apply to college, approximately ten percent reported they were undecided or not planning to apply prior to learning about the Free Application Days. Their hesitation reflected the interconnected barriers described by prior research, including perceived cost, limited procedural knowledge, and doubts about the value or feasibility of college (Perna, 2006). Students in this group frequently cited not knowing where to begin, concerns about application fees, and uncertainty about affordability as leading factors influencing their reluctance.

Counselor encouragement and school culture strongly influenced students’ college predispositions. Counselors described building momentum before the event through early exposure activities, senior orientations, and relationship-based guidance. These efforts align with

research showing that counselor relationships and school climate shape college going beliefs long before students begin applying (Bryan et al., 2011). The rural counselor emphasized that steady encouragement led students to develop greater senses of confidence and hope, which became especially salient when the application process became more accessible during the Free Application Days. Peer influence also played an important role in shaping early aspirations. Students witnessed classmates applying, receiving acceptances, and celebrating their milestones, creating a collective atmosphere that normalized participation. This aligns with findings that peer norms and shared expectations contribute to the development of college going identities (Engberg & Allen, 2011). The suburban counselor stated, “it was 100% because everybody’s doing it,” reflecting how social momentum shaped predispositions toward applying.

The impact of this phase was particularly strong among underrepresented students, including first generation students and students of color. Nearly one in five underrepresented respondents had not initially planned to apply to college before learning about the Free Application Days. Many students cited financial concerns, limited procedural knowledge, and uncertainty about their readiness; barriers consistent with existing research on inequitable access to college information and resources (Perna, 2006). Yet most described the Free Application Days as very or extremely helpful, indicating that the initiative played a meaningful role in shifting early beliefs about college feasibility. Collectively, these patterns demonstrate that Kansas Free Application Days supported the development of college going aspirations by increasing visibility, strengthening encouragement, and fostering a positive culture around applying, all key elements of the predisposition phase (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Search Phase

The search phase begins when students actively gather information about colleges, evaluate their options, and determine what institutions they may be interested in pursuing (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Findings from this study reveal that Kansas Free Application Days, supported by the Apply Kansas framework, shaped students' engagement in this phase by enhancing preparation, increasing access to information, and strengthening school-based application completion support. Preparation activities were essential to the search phase. Counselors described multiple layers of structured preparation in the weeks leading up to the Free Application Days, including senior orientations, college and career fairs, targeted seminars, parent webinars, and application-planning worksheets. These structures provided students with opportunities to clarify their interests, identify potential colleges, and gather the information needed to apply. Preparation activities such as college fairs and application-planning worksheets allowed students to enter the Free Application Days with clearer plans of where they wanted to apply. These forms of scaffolding align with prior research showing that timely and structured information significantly improves students' ability to navigate the complexity of the application process (Castleman & Page, 2014).

Apply Kansas further strengthened the search phase by increasing staff knowledge and consistency of support. Counselors highlighted how statewide training and coordinated messaging improved their ability to answer student questions, clarify requirements, and support students through applications. This aligns with research demonstrating that counselor expertise is central to reducing misinformation and facilitating informed college planning (Belasco, 2013). The rural counselor explained that Apply Kansas "allowed me to be quick on answering their questions," highlighting how staff preparation directly informed student readiness.

Peer interactions also enhanced students' search behaviors. As students completed applications in shared environments such as in a classroom, they asked questions aloud, learned from one another, and sought guidance collectively. These collaborative environments strengthened students' confidence and encouraged them to consider a wider range of postsecondary options. Such patterns reflect research indicating that peer-supported exploration can broaden students' institutional awareness and expand their college options (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). In summary, the combination of structured preparation, school-based support, and Apply Kansas resources enhanced students' ability to gather information, explore various institutions, and approach the application process with increased confidence and clarity. These elements represent essential characteristics of the search phase as outlined by Hossler and Gallagher (1987).

Choice Phase

The choice phase represents the culmination of the college-choice process, when students take concrete action by submitting applications and making enrollment decisions (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Findings from both the qualitative interviews and student questionnaire indicate that Kansas Free Application Days significantly shaped the factors influencing student behavior during this phase. Financial considerations were one of the primary influences driving students' decisions. Nearly half of all surveyed students reported that saving money was their main reason for applying during the Free Application Days. This finding aligns with literature demonstrating that application fees reduce the number and range of institutions to which students apply, particularly for low-income and first generation students (Smith et al., 2014). Counselors described similar patterns, noting that removing fees reduced the perceived risk of applying and encouraged students to consider institutions they previously viewed as financially inaccessible.

The structured timing of the three-day event also moved students decisively from intention to action. Counselors consistently described the Free Application Days as creating a sense of urgency that countered procrastination and encouraged early application submission. This behavioral dynamic reflects prior findings that structured deadlines and reminders significantly increase college application completion (Castleman & Page, 2014). Student data reflected the same pattern: more than half applied to more colleges than originally planned because of the Free Application Days. The initiative also influenced application choices. Over one-third of students reported that the Free Application Days affected where they applied or enrolled. Counselors shared that students routinely applied to additional institutions when the fee barrier was removed. These findings reflect Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) assertion that financial access and perceived opportunity shape the final decision-making process.

Implementation structure shaped the degree of influence. In the rural school, embedding the campaign into a required class period resulted in nearly universal participation and higher application volume. In suburban and urban settings, participation remained strong, though increases in volume were more modest due to optional participation or preexisting access to fee waivers. These patterns align with research indicating that school-level structures, such as dedicated time and direct support, are critical mechanisms for translating statewide policies into student action (Perna & Jones, 2013). Underrepresented students experienced notable benefits during the choice phase. Many cited cost savings as their primary reason for applying, and a significant portion indicated that a standard application fee would have changed where they enrolled. These findings are consistent with research demonstrating that financial barriers disproportionately affect underrepresented students' application and enrollment decisions (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013). Kansas Free Application Days reduced a key barrier and

expanded students' capacity to take action during the final stage of the college choice process. Overall, Kansas Free Application Days accelerated and expanded the choice phase by reducing financial barriers, promoting early action, and broadening students' postsecondary options.

Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura's (1986) SCT provides a complementary lens for understanding how Kansas Free Application Days influenced students' actions and decision-making. SCT emphasizes the interplay among personal beliefs, environmental conditions, and behavioral choices. A central construct within SCT is self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their ability to successfully complete a task. Findings from this study show that the initiative increased students' self-efficacy by providing structured support, opportunities to build competence, and social modeling through peers and counselors.

Counselor guidance emerged as a significant environmental support influencing student behavior. Students consistently described counselor assistance as one of the most helpful aspects of the campaign, and counselors noted that students who received support often became more confident in their ability to complete applications. These patterns align with Bandura's (1986) assertion that guided practice and encouragement strengthen self-efficacy, which increases the likelihood that individuals will engage in challenging tasks. Counselors also described students who initially doubted themselves but became increasingly confident after receiving acceptance notifications, illustrating how successful experiences can reinforce students' beliefs in their own capabilities.

Peer interactions also reflected core SCT mechanisms. Students frequently completed applications in shared spaces where classmates asked questions aloud, compared progress, and encouraged one another. Counselors described these environments as generating momentum or

positive energy that motivated hesitant students to participate. These peer dynamics functioned as social modeling, in which observing others' successes increases one's belief in their own ability to succeed. Environmental structures shaped through Apply Kansas reinforced behavioral engagement. The clear timeline, statewide messaging, and consistency of information reduced uncertainty and allowed students to act with greater confidence. Bandura (1986) argues that environments that reduce ambiguity and offer structured opportunities enable individuals to translate intentions into behavior. The school that embedded Free Application Days into a required class saw higher engagement, mirroring SCT's principle of triadic reciprocal causation, in which behavior is shaped by the interaction between personal beliefs and environmental opportunities (Bandura, 1986).

These dynamics were particularly meaningful for underrepresented students, school counseling staff reported that the Free Application Days made the application process feel more manageable and helped them feel capable of applying. The combination of direct support, fee removal, and structured application environments reduced psychological barriers and strengthened students' belief that they could navigate college going tasks. In summary, Kansas Free Application Days influenced student behavior by strengthening self-efficacy, providing social modeling, and creating supportive environments, all central components of SCT.

Summary of Theoretical Connections

Across the predisposition, search, and choice phases, findings from this study demonstrate that Kansas Free Application Days shaped students' college decision-making in ways consistent with Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model. The initiative helped shift aspirations by strengthening visibility and encouragement during the predisposition phase. It

improved information gathering and readiness through structured preparation and Apply Kansas supports during the search phase. It influenced application behavior and decision-making during the choice phase by reducing cost barriers, creating urgency, and expanding the range of institutions students considered. When viewed through the lens of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), these findings further illustrate how self-efficacy, environmental supports, and social modeling interact to influence students' behaviors. The structured, supportive, and collaborative environments created through Kansas Free Application Days increased students' confidence, reduced uncertainty, and encouraged meaningful action.

The initiative was most impactful in schools that embedded Free Application Days within existing structures such as advisory programs, required courses, and schoolwide college going events. These patterns underscore that statewide policy interventions are most effective when paired with school-level systems that support ongoing preparation and guidance (Perna & Jones, 2013). Overall, the alignment between the findings, Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) theoretical model, and SCT (Bandura, 1986) illustrates that Kansas Free Application Days influenced multiple stages and mechanisms of the college-choice process by shaping aspirations, strengthening exploration, and supporting application decisions.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Findings from this study carry implications for state policy, district and school practice, and institutional strategies across the Kansas education system. Together, they highlight the importance of coordinated structures that reduce financial risk, simplify procedural steps, and strengthen student support during the college application process. While statewide leadership establishes the conditions for access, the effectiveness of Kansas Free Application Days

ultimately depends on how high schools and postsecondary institutions operationalize the initiative within their local contexts.

The Kansas model offers an important example of how policy and practice can align to reduce barriers to college access across systems and settings. Unlike many states where application fee waivers are limited to individual institutions or specific student populations, Kansas has implemented a universal state-coordinated model that includes all public institutions and invites participation from private colleges across the state. Kansas Free Application Days are also embedded within a broader statewide access strategy that includes Apply Kansas application completion support programming and year-round need-based fee waivers. This alignment demonstrates how states can move beyond fragmented access initiatives toward system-level strategies intentionally designed to reduce financial, informational, psychological, and social barriers to college entry. In doing so, Kansas provides a policy model that other states should consider when designing coordinated approaches to expanding postsecondary access.

This study also highlights how the effectiveness of statewide access initiatives depends on local school contexts and implementation structures. Findings across rural, suburban, and urban schools demonstrate that while the removal of application fees expands opportunities broadly, the degree to which students benefit depends heavily on school-level structures, staffing models, and access to college advising support. Rural schools benefited from relational counseling structures and embedded application time within required coursework. Suburban schools often used the campaign to facilitate completion of preexisting plans, and urban schools demonstrated the value of specialized college and career readiness roles in supporting large student populations. These findings illustrate that state policy creates the opportunity structure

for access, but school-level implementation determines how effectively students are able to take advantage of that opportunity.

Finally, this study establishes an empirical baseline for evaluating the impact of statewide free application campaigns on student behavior. The findings demonstrate that the initiative influences student decision-making in several important ways. Removing application fees reduces perceived financial risk, counselor-supported application environments provide procedural guidance, and collective application experiences create peer-driven encouragement to apply.

Implications for State-Level Coordination and High School Implementation

The first implication is establishing predictable, statewide timelines and aligned messaging. At the state level, findings indicate that Kansas Free Application Days are most effective when they occur within clearly defined, recurring fall timelines supported by consistent communication. Counselors across rural, suburban, and urban settings emphasized that predictable dates created planning guardrails for staff and normalized college application activity for students. For KBOR and KSDE, this suggests the importance of maintaining stable annual dates and aligning messaging, toolkits, and outreach so that application planning becomes an expected component of the senior year statewide.

The second implication is intentionally aligning the Free Application Days with existing college-access initiatives. Results demonstrate that Kansas Free Application Days function most effectively when embedded within a broader sequence of postsecondary planning milestones. Aligning the initiative with Apply Kansas timelines, FAFSA completion efforts, and senior-year advising structures creates a coherent pathway that supports students through the search and choice phases of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model. State-level coordination

should therefore prioritize sequencing and shared calendars across initiatives rather than treating Free Application Days as a stand-alone event.

The next implication is embedding application support within the school day to maximize participation. At the high school level, findings indicate that providing structured time during the school day substantially increases participation and completion. The rural school's integration of Free Application Days into a required course resulted in near-universal senior participation and increased the number of applications submitted per student. This approach eliminated reliance on voluntary attendance and ensured equitable access to support. When embedding into the master schedule is not feasible, schools should prioritize protected time through advisory periods, flex blocks, or structured workshops to achieve similar outcomes.

An additional implication is creating opportunities for students to apply alongside their peers during the school day. Collective application experiences reduced psychological and social barriers for students who were uncertain about postsecondary education or had not yet formed firm future plans. Counseling staff described how applying alongside classmates often motivated students who were initially unsure or uninterested to consider submitting an application.

Applying alongside peers normalizes questions, reduces perceived risk, and creates a sense of shared momentum around the college application process. Schools should therefore view collective application events as both procedural support and confidence-building interventions.

A fifth implication involves distributing responsibility for implementation across the school community. The results indicate that application support is most sustainable and effective when responsibility extends beyond school counseling staff alone. While counselors coordinated Free Application Days, implementation was strengthened when teachers, administrators, and postsecondary partners shared roles in promotion, supervision, and student support. This

distributed approach reduced reliance on one-on-one counseling and helped address capacity constraints associated with high student-to-school counselor ratios. ASCA (2019) recommends a ratio of 1:250; however, many schools exceed this threshold. Findings from this study suggest that policymakers and school systems should consider lowering student-to-school counselor ratios, as the school with a ratio closest to the recommended level demonstrated the highest student participation.

The last implication for high school implementation involves prioritizing early, inclusive communication that reaches underserved students. Effective implementation also depended on early and sustained communication with students and families. Counselors who began outreach early and coordinated reminders experienced stronger participation and fewer last-minute barriers. Importantly, several students applied only after learning that financial and procedural support was available through Free Application Days. High schools must therefore ensure outreach extends beyond students already planning to attend college and intentionally targets underrepresented populations who may lack awareness of fee waivers or continue to face informational barriers.

Implications for Higher Education Policy and Practice

The first implication focuses on simplifying application processes to reduce procedural burden. For postsecondary institutions, results highlight the need to minimize procedural complexity during Free Application Days. Counselors consistently identified inconsistent fee waiver requirements and application procedures as barriers that slowed student progress and increased reliance on school-based support. Institutions can reduce these barriers by simplifying application forms, embedding need-based fee waiver questions directly into applications, and providing clear, consistent instructions across platforms.

The next implication emphasizes the need for targeted professional development for high school staff. Results underscore the importance of institutional support for high school personnel responsible for guiding students through the application process. Postsecondary institutions should offer regular professional development focused on application platforms, institutional requirements, and FAFSA-related processes. Providing clear guidance on timelines and post-application steps equips schools to support students beyond application submission and reduces confusion during critical transition points.

Another implication highlights the importance of direct, early communication with students and families. Institution-led outreach emerged as a key driver of student awareness and participation. Counselors reported that when postsecondary institutions communicated directly with students and families early in the process, students were more likely to view the fee-free window as legitimate and time-sensitive. Direct, clear institutional communication reduced misinformation and eased the informational burden on schools, reinforcing Kansas Free Application Days as a coordinated statewide effort rather than an optional opportunity. Within marketing materials, providing clear, step-by-step guidance with explicit actions and timelines would further strengthen student understanding and engagement.

Building on this work, KBOR is actively collecting and reporting data from public institutions on Kansas Free Application Days, including comparative yield rates of applications submitted during and outside of the campaign window. This emerging dataset positions Kansas to move beyond participation metrics toward evaluating enrollment outcomes, strengthening its role as a national model for college access policy.

The final implication underscores the value of strengthening partnerships through on-site admissions support. The presence of admissions representatives during Free Application Days

enhanced student confidence and application completion, particularly in schools with limited college and career readiness staffing. Direct access to higher education staff allowed students to ask questions, confirm requirements, and navigate application processes with reassurance. Expanding these partnerships can strengthen the equity impact of free application initiatives by extending procedural and informational support to students who might not otherwise apply.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study offers a foundation for understanding how Free Application Days influence application behavior, but several questions remain about longer-term impacts, student outcomes, and the effectiveness of different implementation models. The first recommendation is for future researchers to examine retention and persistence outcomes for students who apply during Free Application Days. Linking application data with longitudinal student records would allow researchers to determine whether participation in the campaign is associated with higher rates of enrollment, continued progress in postsecondary education, or credential completion. Such analyses would be particularly valuable for understanding whether the removal of application fees disproportionately benefits first generation, low-income, and underrepresented students and whether fee-free applications serve as a catalyst for long-term success. Another recommendation is for future research to examine how Free Application Days interact with other college access interventions, including FAFSA completion efforts, senior signing events, and summer melt initiatives, and whether such supports influence students' postsecondary enrollment outcomes. Understanding how these interventions intersect may help schools and state agencies determine whether coordinated access strategies not only increase application behavior but also translate into actual college enrollment. A final recommendation for future research is to examine the impact of implementing a spring Free Application Day window. Research examining whether a

spring fee free application opportunity influences late application behavior, institutional choice, or enrollment decisions could provide important insights into how timing shapes student access. Such analysis would be particularly relevant for students who are undecided, first generation, or navigating complex financial circumstances.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Kansas Free Application Days played a meaningful role in shaping students' decisions to apply to college by reducing financial barriers, simplifying procedural tasks, and creating structured opportunities for support within schools. Across rural, suburban, and urban contexts, students described the fee free window as both a financial incentive and a catalyst to take action, while counselors emphasized the value of a predictable statewide timeline. Together, these results show that the initiative functioned not only as a cost-saving measure but also as an organizing mechanism that strengthened school-based postsecondary support efforts. In this way, Kansas Free Application Days operated as a coordinated policy intervention that aligned statewide leadership, institutional participation, and school-level implementation.

Through the lens of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model, the campaign influenced multiple stages of decision making. It supported the predisposition phase by increasing visibility around college planning and encouraging students who were initially unsure about applying. It enhanced the search phase by improving access to information and creating structured preparation opportunities. Finally, it shaped the choice phase by reducing perceived financial risk, prompting early action, and expanding the range of institutions students considered. When viewed through Bandura's (1986) SCT, the findings further illustrate how

counselor encouragement, peer modeling, and supportive environments strengthened students' self-efficacy and increased their willingness to engage in the application process.

The study also underscores that the impact of Kansas Free Application Days is closely tied to local context. While all three schools benefited from the initiative, the degree of influence varied based on scheduling structures, staffing capacity, and the ways schools prioritized college going activities. The rural school's decision to embed application completion within a required class ensured universal access to support and made a larger impact, whereas the suburban and urban schools relied more on student initiative to engage with available opportunities. These differences highlight that statewide initiatives are most effective when paired with consistent school-level structures that make information and support accessible to all students. Overall, Kansas Free Application Days served as a catalyst for early application behavior, helped reduce financial and procedural barriers, and provided meaningful support for students.

Importantly, this study provides one of the earliest empirical examinations of a statewide free college application campaign implemented across diverse school contexts. This study demonstrates how a coordinated statewide initiative can operate through partnerships among state leadership, postsecondary institutions, and local schools to influence student application behavior. By reducing financial and procedural barriers while strengthening school-based support systems, Kansas Free Application Days created opportunities for students to explore postsecondary options they may not have previously considered. The initiative also helped normalize the college application process within schools by creating structured opportunities for students to apply alongside their peers, ask questions, and seek guidance. For some students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, the campaign opened a door that might otherwise have remained closed.

At the same time, the initiative did not fully overcome inequities created by local variation in school capacity and structure, suggesting that ongoing coordination, communication, and system-level support are necessary to ensure that all students benefit equitably. The results of this study suggest that statewide free application campaigns hold promise as scalable policy interventions capable of expanding access to postsecondary education when implemented in partnership with high schools, communities, and higher education partners. Kansas Free Application Days do not simply reduce application costs. They create an opportunity structure that allows students who may not have previously envisioned themselves applying to college to begin engaging with the postsecondary pathway.

To conclude, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how statewide free application campaigns intersect with school-level practices to influence student decision-making. The results highlight both the promise and the limitations of policy interventions aimed at expanding access to postsecondary education. As Kansas continues to refine and strengthen its college access initiatives, the insights from this study can help inform strategies that promote consistency, equity, and meaningful support for all students navigating the transition to college.

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Appendix A - Counselor Consent

Impact of Kansas Free Application Days

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE:

9/18/2025

LENGTH OF STUDY:

45 minutes

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:
CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

Dr. Donna Augustine-Shaw; donna5@ksu.edu

Mistie Knox; mistie006@ksu.edu

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:

Mistie Knox; mistie006@ksu.edu

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:

Dr. Lisa Rubin, IRB Chair; 203 Fairchild Hall., Manhattan, KS; 785-532-3224; rubin@ksu.edu.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of the Kansas Free Application Days campaign on college application and enrollment behavior. Specifically, the study seeks to determine whether the initiative encourages more students to apply to and enroll in college or primarily shifts student preferences from one institution to another. The study also aims to understand the role of school counseling staff in implementing the campaign, supporting students through the application process, and addressing barriers to college access.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

You are asked to participate in a structured interview as part of a policy analysis case study on the Kansas Free Application Days campaign. The interview will last about 30–45 minutes and will take place on Zoom at a time convenient for you. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and the recording deleted. Questions will focus on your experiences and perspectives as a school counselor in supporting and implementing the campaign. You may skip any question or stop the interview at any time.

A total of three counselors will be interviewed, with one representing a rural school, one representing a suburban school, and one representing an urban school. Because many schools across Kansas fall into each of these categories, the likelihood of being individually identified is very low. To further protect confidentiality, no names, schools, or districts will be included in reports, and pseudonyms (e.g., Counselor A, B, C) will be used in transcripts. Audio files will be securely stored on Mistie's personal computer and deleted after transcription, with all data maintained in password-protected, encrypted files accessible only to principal investigators. Even after identifiers are removed, data will **not** be used in future research.

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and

willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT NAME:

**PARTICIPANT
SIGNATURE:**

**RESEARCHER
SIGNATURE:**

DATE:

DATE:

Appendix B - Student Questionnaire

Kansas Free Application Days 2025 Questionnaire - Fall 2025

Start of Block: Consent

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. I appreciate your willingness to share your experiences and insights about the Kansas Free College Application Campaign. My name is Mistie Knox, and I am conducting this research to better understand how these campaigns influence students' college enrollment decisions. The goal is to gain perspectives on how these initiatives impact students and what factors might enhance or limit their effectiveness. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may skip any question or exit the questionnaire at any time without penalty. Your responses will remain confidential, and no identifying information will be used in the final study.

By continuing with this questionnaire, you acknowledge that you have permission and consent to participate in this research. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at mistie006@ksu.edu. You may also contact my co-major professors, Dr. Donna Augustine-Shaw (donna5@ksu.edu) or Dr. Kellen Adams (kadams@ksu.edu), with questions about the study. You may also contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, Lisa Rubin at rubin@ksu.edu with any questions. Thank you for your time and participation.

☐ Yes, I agree and consent.

End of Block: Consent

Start of Block: High School

What high school do you attend?

- ☐ Rural School Name
- ☐ Suburban School Name
- ☐ Urban School Name

End of Block: High School

Start of Block:

Q1 Did you submit an application for admission during the Kansas Free Application Days?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
-

Q2 Did you know students experiencing financial hardship can apply to college for free all year around?

☐ Yes

☐ No

End of Block:

Start of Block: Demographics

Q3 Are you a first generation college student? (A first generation college student is someone whose parents or guardians did not complete a four-year college degree.)

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Unsure

Q4 What is your race/ethnicity?

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native American Indian or Alaska Native

☐ Asian

☐ Black or African American

☐ Hispanic or Latino

☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

☐ White

☐ Two or more races

☐ Prefer not to answer

End of Block: Demographics

Start of Block: College Application Plans

Q5 Before learning about the Free Application Days, had you planned to apply to college?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

Q6 If you were unsure or not planning to apply, what were your main reasons? (select all that apply)

- ☐ Cost of Application Fees
- ☐ Unsure if college is right for me
- ☐ Didn't think I could afford college
- ☐ No one encouraged me to apply
- ☐ Didn't know where to start
- ☐ Other

Q7 How many colleges did you apply to in total (including those during Free Application Days)?

- ☐ 1
 - ☐ 2
 - ☐ 3
 - ☐ 4
 - ☐ 5
 - ☐ 6 or more
-

Q8 How many colleges did you apply to specifically during Free Application Days?

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5
- ☐ 6 or more

Q9 Did Free Application Days influence your decision to apply to more colleges than originally planned?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure
- ☐ I did not apply during the Free Application Days

End of Block: College Application Plans

Start of Block: Participation

Q10 What was the main reason you applied during the Free Application Days?

- ☐ To save money on application fees
 - ☐ To explore more college options
 - ☐ My school encouraged me to apply
 - ☐ Other
-

Q11 Did your high school offer any events or support specifically related to Free Application Days (e.g., Apply Kansas, college application workshops)?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

End of Block: Participation

Start of Block: Financial Impact

Q12 To what extent did Free Application Days reduce financial barriers to applying for college?

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Slightly
- ☐ Moderately
- ☐ Very
- ☐ Extremely

End of Block: Financial Impact

Start of Block: Enrollment Influence

Q13 Did Free Application Days influence your decision on where to apply to college?

- ☐ Yes, it influenced my decision on where to apply/enroll
- ☐ No, it did not influence my decision on where to apply/enroll
- ☐ Did not apply during the Free Application Days

Q14 If the application fee had been between \$40-\$50, would it have changed where you decided to enroll?

- ☐ Yes, I would have enrolled in a different institution
- ☐ No, I would have enrolled in the same institution
- ☐ Unsure

End of Block: Enrollment Influence

Start of Block: Barriers to College Application Process

Q15 During your college application process, did you encounter any barriers? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Application fees
 - ☐ Lack of guidance or support
 - ☐ Unfamiliarity with the application process
 - ☐ Difficulty obtaining transcripts or recommendations
 - ☐ Financial concerns beyond application fees
 - ☐ Technical issues with applications
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
 - ☐ No barriers encountered
-

Q16 Which of the following would have helped reduce barriers in your college application process? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ More support from school counselors
- ☐ More information on college options
- ☐ Extended deadlines for free application fees
- ☐ Other (please specify)

End of Block: Barriers to College Application Process

Start of Block: Overall Perception

Q17 How helpful did you find Free Application Days in your college application process?

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Slightly
- ☐ Moderately
- ☐ Very
- ☐ Extremely

End of Block: Overall Perception

Appendix C - School Counselor Interview Protocol

School Counseling Staff Perspectives on Free College Application Campaigns

Interviewer: Mistie Knox

Interview Length: 45 minutes

Participant Group: One school counseling staff from three high schools of differing sizes, urban, suburban, and rural.

High School: _____

Introduction and Informed Consent Script:

"Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I appreciate your willingness to share your experiences and insights about the Kansas free college application campaign. My name is Mistie Knox, and I am conducting this research to better understand how these campaigns influence students' college enrollment decisions. The goal is to gain perspectives on how these initiatives impact students and what factors might enhance or limit their effectiveness. Before we begin, I want to emphasize that your participation is completely voluntary, and you may choose to skip any question or end the interview at any time. Your responses will remain confidential, and no identifying information will be used in the final study. Additionally, I want to clarify that this interview is part of my independent research. Please feel free to share your honest thoughts and experiences as if you were speaking with a friend, rather than answering based on my professional role.

If you agree to participate, I will be recording this interview for accuracy. Is that okay with you?"

(Wait for verbal consent)

"Great. If at any time you have questions, please feel free to ask. Let's get started."

Interview Questions:

Background and Context

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and your role as a school counselor?
2. Tell me about your school and its student population.
3. What is the School Counselor to Student Ratio?
4. What is the senior class size?
5. What is your experience with Free College Application Campaigns?
6. What are your current perceptions of Free College Application Campaigns?

Perceptions of Free College Application Campaigns

7. Tell me about how you format your Free College Application Days? Do you provide college application completion support? Are there any other stakeholders who come in to support students during these dates (colleges, organizations, etc.)?
8. Tell me about how students at your school engage with Free College Application Days.
9. From your perspective, how do these campaigns influence students' decisions to apply to college?
10. In your experience, how do first generation students engage with Free Application Campaigns compared to their peers?

11. Have you noticed any differences in how students from different demographic backgrounds (e.g., race, socioeconomic status, English learners, or students with disabilities) engage with Free Application Days?
12. Do students utilize the financial hardship fee waiver?
13. What roles do parents or guardians play in students' decisions to participate in Free Application Days?
14. Are there any external organizations, community programs, or partnerships that assist with Free Application Days?

Challenges and Implementation

15. What challenges do you face in implementing Free College Application Days, and how do they impact your ability to support students effectively?
16. How does the workload of school counselors affect the implementation and effectiveness of Free Application Days?

Impact and Recommendations

17. In your experience, do students who participate in Free Application Days follow through with college enrollment?
18. Based on your experience, what do you believe makes Free College Application Campaigns most effective?
19. Do you think there were students who would not have applied to a specific institution if there had been an application fee?
20. How do you prepare students prior to the event?
21. If you could make changes to these campaigns to improve their impact, what would you suggest?
22. Is there anything else you think I should know about how Free College Application Campaigns impact students' college decisions?

Closing Script:

"Thank you again for your time and for sharing your valuable insights. Your input is incredibly helpful in understanding how these campaigns influence students and how they might be improved to better support college access. If you have any additional thoughts later, feel free to reach out to me. I truly appreciate your time and expertise. Have a great rest of your day!"