

**EXPLORING STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF POST-
SECONDARY EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS**

by

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF POST-SECONDARY EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS

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This study was focused on Canadian undergraduate students' perspectives of how they became aspired to pursue higher education. Participants were recruited from undergraduate classes at a university in southwestern Ontario. Seventy-one participants took part in the study and completed an online survey. Narratives from participants were qualitatively analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Six different themes were generated: natural progression, societal and parental expectations, family influence, career opportunities, role models, and emancipation. Directions for future research and implications are discussed.

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Introduction

With the global shift towards a knowledge-based economy, post-secondary education has replaced the high school diploma as the foundation for economic and social success (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). Researchers have identified educational aspirations as an important precursor for successful educational attainment (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Perna, 2002). Although many factors contribute to the successful completion of a post-secondary degree (e.g., self-efficacy, parental support, financial support, grade point average), aspirations have been described as the most valuable predictors of eventual educational and occupational attainment (Finnie, Mueller, & Sweetman, 2008; Mau & Bikos, 2000). Educational aspirations have been defined as the level of educational attainment one desires to achieve (Wilson & Wilson, 1992). Conventionally, educational aspirations have been studied by researchers favouring deductive reasoning processes (e.g., Belanger, Akbari, & Madgett, 2009; Geckova, Tavel, van Dijk, Abel, & Reijneveld, 2010; Mau & Bikos, 2000; Wilson & Wilson, 1992), with little attention given to how people develop aspirations for higher education (e.g., Behnke & Piercy, 2004; Sikora & Pokropek, 2011; Teachman & Paasch, 1998). There is a need for knowledge concerning how aspirations develop in order to help increase undergraduate and graduate enrollment and support future students (Hall, 2001). Without knowledge of how higher education aspirations develop, prospective Canadian undergraduate students cannot be adequately supported in their post-secondary education. To address this gap, I will explore undergraduate students' understandings of how they developed their academic aspirations for higher education.

Literature Review

The following section will provide an overview of educational aspirations in the scholarly literature. This review will be divided into four sections, beginning with definitions and approaches used to study educational aspirations, followed by an overview of related factors (e.g., family, peers, personal, and sociocultural factors, respectively). Also, given that most research on educational aspirations has been quantitative, quantitative studies will be discussed along with qualitative studies.

Definitions and Approaches to the Study of Educational Aspirations

Educational aspirations have been studied across several disciplines including sociology, psychology, and economics (Farmer, 1985; Geckova et al., 2010). Some researchers have conceptualized educational aspirations as an individual's perceived probability that they will attain a certain level of education (Abu-Hilal, 2000; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). The variability of how educational aspirations are defined in the scholarly literature is concerning because, without explicit explanation of educational aspirations, participants may be responding to their academic expectations as opposed to their aspirations (Brown & Lent, 2004). The problem with conflating aspirations with expectations is that educational expectations account for future plans while taking into account realistic factors (e.g., access, finances, barriers) (Finnie et al., 2008), which are more relevant for educational expectations as opposed to aspirations. Given that educational aspirations have been identified as important precursors to eventual educational attainment, understanding the factors at play during the development of those aspirations would provide valuable insight (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Perna, 2002).

Most work in the area of education aspiration is quantitative, with researchers using rating scales and asking participants the question "what is the level of education you *hope* to

achieve?” (Geckova et al., 2010). Quantitative studies have provided knowledge of predictor variables related to educational aspirations. More recently, there has been a shift towards qualitative methods and participants' lived experiences and understandings. The most common data collection methods used has been semi-structured interviews or a mixed-methods approach using both interview and questionnaire methods. In Canada, the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) is the only large-scale, longitudinal study that has tracked students' educational aspirations over time (between 1998 and 2009) (Statistics Canada, 2011). The YITS highlighted many important factors related to educational aspirations, with one of them being the influence of significant others.

Familial and Peer Factors

The influence of significant others, specifically parents, siblings, and peers, in relation to educational aspirations has been widely cited (Garg et al., 2002; Mau & Bikos, 2000; Wilson & Wilson, 1992). The following section will review the influence of parents, siblings, and peers focusing on: parents' educational background, parents' aspirations for their children, parents' occupational status and parents' involvement, both within the home and the academic environment; the influence of siblings through role-modelling behaviours and serving as informational resources; and the influence of peers during the process of aspirational development.

Parental educational attainment and its influence on children's educational aspirations has been well documented (Mau & Bikos, 2000; Spera, 2005; Wartman & Savage, 2008; Wilson & Wilson, 1992), with researchers stating that the higher the educational attainment of parents, the greater the likelihood of children adopting the aspirations their parents have for them (Wilson & Wilson, 1992). Post-secondary aspirations have also been positively associated with higher

parental educational attainment and increased occupational status of parents (e.g., socioeconomic status (SES)) (e.g., Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Fraser & Garg, 2012; Wartman & Savage, 2012).

However, results from aspirational studies related to parental educational attainment and occupational status are inconclusive because researchers have also reported that, despite parents attaining lower levels of education and holding lower aspirations for their children, their children still held high educational aspirations (Chung, Loeb, & Gonzo, 1996; Mau & Bikos, 2000; Wilson & Wilson, 1992). In addition, results from other studies have shown that SES may play an indirect role in the development of educational aspirations when economic resources and parental involvement are considered (Fraser & Garg, 2012; Garg et al., 2002; Spera, 2005).

The construct of parental involvement has been variably defined (e.g., Fraser & Garg, 2012; Garg et al., 2002). Fraser and Garg (2012) defined parental involvement as children's perception of their parents' educational expectations, parents' concern for education, parental involvement with school and homework, and overall family cohesiveness. Other researchers defined parental involvement as parents' personal and school-based involvement in their children's education (e.g., Garg et al., 2002). Garg et al. (2002) reported that parental involvement, background, and behaviour played an indirect role in children's educational aspirations by fostering an enabling environment for the development of aspirations. Since researchers have reported the strong influence of parents' aspirations and expectations in their children's educational achievement and the weak relationship between parental supervision and educational achievement (Chen & Fan, 2001; Singh, Bickley, Trivette, Keith, Keith, & Anderson, 1995), children's educational aspirations may also be more heavily influenced by similar parental factors. Unfortunately, without consistent and explicit definitions of parental involvement across studies, it is difficult to discern the most important factors (Chen & Fan,

2001; Garg et al., 2002; Mau & Bikos, 2000). Similarly, without space for participants and/or parents to provide, in their own words, a description of their parents' or own involvement, researchers may be unaware or missing components of the variable.

Researchers used qualitative approaches to provide nuanced knowledge about relationships between variables of interest (e.g., significant people, socioeconomic status, and racial and ethnic diversity) related to post-secondary aspirations (Hill, Ramirez, & Dumka, 2003; Morrow, 2013; Roubeni, De Haene, Keatley, Shah, & Rasmussen, 2015). The majority of qualitative work in the area of post-secondary aspirations has focused on parental narratives of children's aspirations (Roubeni et al., 2015) or, narratives of students from certain ethnic groups (e.g., Latino, Hispanic, African) (Ceja, 2006; Zalaquett, 2006).

Immigrant parents have been found to have higher educational aspirations for their children than native-born parents have (Ceja, 2006; Raleigh and Kao, 2010; Roubeni et al., 2015; Urdan, Solek, & Schoenfelder, 2007). In turn, children of immigrant parents also have higher aspirations than children of native-born parents because they feel a greater sense of obligation towards their parents who provided them with opportunities that they did not have themselves (Urdan, Solek, & Schoenfelder, 2007). Researchers have observed that familial obligation plays a role in influencing decisions related to education, specifically for children of different ethnicities; therefore, it can be speculated that familial obligation may also be a factor in the development of post-secondary educational aspirations (Girsef, Monseur, Van Campenhoutd Girsef, & Lafontaine, 2012).

Within the context of the family, the importance of siblings in relation to educational aspirations has been studied in the same manner as parents have been studied (Ceja, 2006; Mau & Bikos, 2000). Among a sample of first-generation Chicana students, older siblings were seen

as paving the path to higher education and transmitting valuable information to their younger siblings about the college application process and knowledge about college-related experiences. Older siblings, who attended college and/or other post-secondary education, have created an expectation of the pursuit of higher education (Ceja, 2006). Results from this qualitative study provided evidence for the important role that older siblings play in college choice and, quite possibly, in the development of post-secondary aspirations (Ceja, 2006).

In addition to sibling involvement, the role of peers in post-secondary aspirations has also been studied (Epstein, 1983; Gutman & Akerman, 2008). Peers were first studied by Epstein (1983) who explained that friends may serve as role models for learning, may provide social reinforcement, and/or may serve as information resources. Peers have also been referred to as frames of reference that individuals may look to when developing aspirations (Gutman & Akerman, 2008). Epstein (1983) compared two groups of students, one on the lower end of achievement and the other on the higher end, and found that, a year later, those students who had higher achieving friends subsequently had higher scores as compared to individuals who had lower achieving friends. Results from Epstein's (1983) study demonstrated the important influence that peers may have on individuals.

Peers have also been found to play a role in the individual academic self-concept of college students in the United States with the influence varying across race (Antonio, 2004). Since these studies have been conducted in the United States, the findings may not be generalizable to Canada, considering the differences in the higher education systems. There is a need for post-secondary aspirational research in the Canadian context, due to the limited nature of applicability of current research (Antonio, 2004).

Personal Factors

Within the academic literature on post-secondary aspirations, researchers have discussed important personal factors (e.g., self-efficacy and academic performance) (Ali & McWhirter, 2006; Betz & Voyten, 1997; Rottinghaus, Lindley, Green, & Borgen, 2002). It has been the researcher's prerogative to choose what factors they believe belong under the personal variable. The importance of personal factors in Canadian students' decision making was demonstrated when Garg and colleagues (2002) reported that their definition of personal factors, comprised of school marks, school and course perceptions, extracurricular readings, and parental educational expectations, had the strongest influence on educational aspirations (predicting 76% of the variance). Furthermore, they reported that the results of the background and family factors were mediated through their personal factors.

The personal factor of self-efficacy has been quantitatively studied in relation to post-secondary aspirations and researchers have consistently reported that occupational/educational self-efficacy and college outcome expectations are the strongest predictors of post-secondary pathways (Ali & McWhirter, 2006; Betz & Voyten, 1997). It can be speculated that the relationship between self-efficacy and post-secondary aspirations may be bi-directional as individuals who aspire to post-secondary education may be more likely to have experiences that help increase their academic self-efficacy further strengthening their desire for higher education.

An important personal factor that has been studied in relation to educational aspirations is academic performance (Carpenter & Fleishman, 1987; Hause, 1971). Researchers have explored academic performance in terms of ability and grade-point average (Hossler & Stage, 1992). Results have indicated that post-secondary aspirations are positively influenced by strong academic ability as demonstrated through good grades (Hossler & Stage, 1992). Furthermore,

researchers have explained that school performance is a crucial way for individuals to learn about their own skills and competencies necessary in fuelling their career aspirations (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000). However, other researchers have found academic proficiency to be the least predictive factor in their model for educational and vocational aspirations of minority students (Mau & Bikos, 2000), further demonstrating the interacting relationships between other variables, such as sociocultural factors.

Sociocultural Factors

While parental and personal factors are important influences on post-secondary aspirations, broader sociocultural factors have also been investigated. Sociocultural and social/familial factors seem to be related, as Strand and Winston (2008) found in their study of the educational aspirations of students attending schools in lower-income areas. Strand and Winston (2008) reported that Black, Asian, and Pakistani students had higher educational aspirations than white British students did, due to high academic self-concept, positive peer-support, and high aspirations in their home environment. The results of this study suggest the importance of mediating factors, such as strong academic self-concept, positive peer support, and strong commitment to schooling.

Both race and ethnicity have been studied in relation to post-secondary aspirations. Racial and ethnic diversity, in relation to post-secondary aspirations, are important because earlier studies and models focused solely on White, male students. Over time, as the post-secondary environment became more racially and ethnically diverse, researchers began to study trends among different groups of people; thus, the focus shifted to Black, Mexican, and Asian populations as well as to immigrant youth (Ceja, 2006, Strand & Winston, 2008). Recognizing that Latino youth have a 60% high school completion rate and are behind other groups in college

degrees (Fry, 2002; Harvey, 2002), Ceja (2004) conducted a study to understand how Chicana students perceived and understood parental influence and its impact on educational aspirations. The study contributed to the discourse of both direct and indirect parental influence on their daughters. An interesting finding from this study found that the influence was not strictly due to what was said but instead how the children understood their parents' lived experience (e.g., their struggles, lack of education, immigrant status). Besides the race and ethnicity of students changing over time, there has also been a shift in terms of gender at the post-secondary level.

Gender is another sociocultural factor whose influence on post-secondary aspirations is inconclusive due to interactions between and across other variables (Finnie et al., 2008). While some researchers have explained differences between the educational aspirations of school-aged girls and boys (e.g., where girls may hold higher aspirations), others have reported that these differences are not significant when considering factors such as SES and parental background (Mau & Bikos, 2000). With the change in Canada's academic environment in which women are outnumbering men in post-secondary education, researchers have explained that the gender disparity may be the result of gender's interaction with other variables (e.g., race, ethnicity, SES); alternatively, it may be result of the differences between the stability of educational aspirations over time (Lakshmanan, 2004; Mau & Bikos, 2000). Moreover, differences in the educational aspirations of men and women may vary due to the complex relationships between factors at all levels including, but not limited to, sociocultural, personal, and familial.

Aims and Rationale

In the current study, I explored Canadian undergraduate students' perspectives on how they became aspired to pursue higher education. I asked two research questions: (a) What fueled

your desire for a university degree? and (b) What significant factors played a role in the development of your desire for a university degree and why?

Educational aspirations have been found to be central to attaining a post-secondary degree (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Perna, 2002). Despite this fact, little is known about how educational aspirations are developed (Mau & Bikos, 2000; Morrow, 2013). Furthermore, the inconsistencies of the scholarly literature on personal, sociocultural, and familial variables has demonstrated a need for participant-centered accounts of aspirational development to understand how these factors may have worked in conjunction or independently.

Existing qualitative studies provide knowledge concerning educational aspirations of students in Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom (Ceja, 2006; Morrow, 2013; Roubeni et al., 2011; Zalaquett, 2006). The current study distinctly explores Canadian students' perspectives on how they became aspired for a university degree. Since the post-secondary system in Canada is different from that of other countries, in terms of hierarchy, funding, and student competition, Canadian students' perspectives and what it means to aspire to pursue higher education needs to be understood (Davies & Hammack, 2005; Davies & Zarifa, 2012; Jones, 1996). Furthermore, given that most Canadian universities are provincially governed and publically funded (Jones, 1996), the large private sector funding in the United States and subsequent intense competition between students is largely absent in Canada (Davies & Hammack, 2005; Davies & Zarifa, 2012; Trow, 1991). The emphasis for Canadian students is, instead, placed on field of study as opposed to institutional reputation when pursuing higher education (Davies & Hammack, 2005). These differences in the structure and culture of higher education in Canada may play a role in the development of students' aspirations, which needs to be further explored.

Considering that the outcome of my search for qualitative work on educational aspirations in the Canadian context only yielded one doctoral dissertation (Hall, 2001), there is need to conduct research that explores contemporary Canadian students' perspectives. In addition, there is a need to gain a holistic understanding of the process and factors related to the development of aspirations, which would be best accomplished by an in-depth exploration of participants' narratives. In-depth participant-centered narratives may also provide greater insight into the maintenance of aspirations, as the current study focused on students who are successfully attending university. This increased clarity on academic aspirations and their development could have benefits for students and, more generally, the higher education system in Canada, which is currently seeing increases in post-secondary enrollment (Statistics Canada, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

I used the adapted status attainment model with the addition of socio-psychological, cultural, and social capital variables as a theoretical basis for how individuals develop aspirations (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Cooper, 2008; Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969). The main tenet of the status attainment model is that individuals invest in resources for social mobilization (Lin, 2001). Therefore, higher education is thought to serve as a gateway to changing one's social positioning (Cooper, 2008). The status attainment model is a sociological approach, which was introduced by Blau and Duncan (1967) which focussed on fathers' education and occupational factors when predicting an individual's aspirations.

Sewell, Haller, and Portes (1969) noticed the shortcoming of only using factors related to fathers in the status attainment model and added social psychological variables to create the Wisconsin model of attainment. The addition of socio-psychological factors including, academic

achievement and encouragement from significant others (e.g., parents, peers, teachers) provided a more holistic view of how factors were related to the development of educational aspirations (Cooper, 2008; Sewell, Haller & Ohlendorf, 1970; Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969).

Over time, other variables were included in the status attainment model, such as cultural and social capital to account for cultural and racial differences, which were previously missed. Cultural capital emphasized the role of cultural resources, usually from family background, language, worldviews and attitudes (Cooper, 2008). Social capital accounted for the power dynamics associated with an individual's social location and available resources (Horvat, 2001). By using a widely-cited and educationally relevant model as a theoretical framework to explore participants' views of the development of educational aspirations, I may tap into factors unique to Canadian undergraduate students and their academic environment.

Epistemological Stance

I will be employing a post-positivist epistemology, where the main assumption is that the world is not easily predictable (Cooper, 1997; Groff, 2004). Post-positivism asserts that the world is complex and that there may be many possible interpretations of the same phenomenon. Post-positivists propose a subjective nature of phenomena due to researchers' own biases, assumptions, and interpretations (Cooper, 1997). Researchers using this paradigm scrutinize their own assumptions and try to understand phenomena through an in-depth observation and reflection on the data and their role in research.

Methods

I used thematic analysis to analyse participants' responses to online survey items. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to identify themes or patterns in meanings across data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was created by Gerald Horton, rooted in the

older method of content analysis, and was developed to study aspects of phenomena that were more implicit and not necessarily observable through quantitative methods (Harper & Thompson, 2011; Merton, 1975). Key features of thematic analysis include theoretical freedom allowing for malleability within different epistemological frameworks, and a comprehensive six-phase procedure used to analyze the data set. Thematic analysis has been employed across disciplines, including psychology, education, and health sciences (Braun & Clarke, n.d.). This analysis is generally used to answer questions about subjective views, perceptions, and experiences. When using thematic analysis, the approach is usually either inductive (i.e., the themes identified are strictly dependent upon the raw data) or deductive (i.e., the themes identified are informed by theories) (Boyatzis, 1998; Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) discussed a hybrid approach combining both the inductive and deductive approaches to data analysis, resulting in enriching themes that may not have been generated if only one approach was used. A similar hybrid approach was used in the current study.

Participants

Undergraduate students enrolled in or auditing at least one course at the University of Guelph were eligible to take part in this study. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board (Appendix A). Students were recruited through both digital (posted on their course's learning management system) and in-class announcements (Appendix B). Participants were asked to consent on the first page of the Qualtrics survey (Appendix C). Seventy-one participants with an average age of 21 completed the survey. Seventy of the 71 (99%) participants identified as female, and 66 (93%) participants were Canadian citizens. Sixty-one (86%) participants identified as White, with seven of those participants indicating more than one cultural background (e.g., Black, Aboriginal, German, Ukrainian, Japanese, and

South Asian). Out of the ten participants who did not identify as White, three identified as Chinese, one as Arab, four as South Asian, one as Chinese-Filipino, and one as Chinese-Japanese. When asked about the education level of their mothers or primary caretakers, 23 (32%) participants reported mothers who held university degrees, 22 (31%) held community college, CEGEP, trade, vocational, apprenticeship, teacher's college, or nursing diploma certificates. Seven participants reported having mothers who held a high school diploma or equivalent, and one mother held a Ph.D. When asked about their fathers or secondary caretakers, 20 (28%) participants reported having fathers who held community college, CEGEP, trade, vocational, apprenticeship, teacher's college, or nursing diploma certificates. Nineteen (27%) of the participants' fathers held a university bachelor's degree, and two held Ph.Ds. Seven participants (.09%) were first generation students. These first generation students were those who indicated that neither of their parents had attained a post-secondary education (e.g., highest level of educational attainment was a high school diploma). Forty-seven (66%) participants reported four or more individuals living at their permanent address, and the average monthly household income before taxes was between \$2501 and \$3800. Parents, participants' own employment earnings, and employers, respectively, were the top three sources of income used by students to finance their education.

Data Collection

Students were asked to complete an online demographic survey and eight open-ended questions using Qualtrics (Appendix D). By using online software to collect responses, students were provided with both anonymity and freedom to answer at their leisure. By providing this comfort, the hope was that they would be able to provide richer responses (McBride, 2012; Pizzolato & Hicklen, 2011). Students who were interested in the study were provided with the

URL to the survey. The average time of completion for the online questionnaire was 52 minutes. After completion of the survey, students were presented with the opportunity to be entered into an incentive draw. At the end of the survey, if participants were interested, they submitted their e-mail address for a 1-in-5 chance of winning \$10 cash prizes. Once the survey was closed, using www.random.org, five winning numbers were picked and matched with the participant's entries. The winning participants were informed via e-mail about their prize and they received their money through e-transfer.

Analysis

The narratives were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis process. There was no need to transcribe the data because the data were collected online. The first phase of data analysis consisted of becoming familiar with the entire dataset. This task was accomplished by reading and re-reading participants' responses to each question. During phase one, I actively read and wrote memos to keep track of initial impressions and any interesting responses. In phase two, I began to do line-by-line coding and assign codes to small parts of participants' responses. In phase three, I started making connections between various codes and developing overarching themes or patterns in responses. Coding was done by hand using tables in Microsoft Word. Similar codes were placed under respective theme categories, and codes that did not fit under a category were put under a "miscellaneous" category. In phase four, the themes were compared to the coded data. During this phase, I tried to understand if my overarching themes were representative of the codes and the raw data. I read and re-read the raw data to clearly understand and accurately represent what I thought participants were trying to say. Coding the data and refining themes and sub-themes was a recursive process. In phase five, I labelled and defined themes.

Rigour

Braun and Clarke (2006) provided a 15-point checklist of rigour criteria for each phase of analysis. The coding phase had the highest number of criteria applied to it. The themes were checked against each other and against the original data, making sure that the themes and original data were consistent and distinctive. I tried ensuring that my claims were plausible in light of presented excerpts. I also ensured that I immersed myself in the data analysis process and gave enough time to develop an in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives.

Reflexivity

Being of Indian descent, the importance of education was stressed on a regular basis to both my brother and I, at an early age. The notion of post-secondary education was valued above all else and the pursuit of higher education was expected from both of us. I must acknowledge that, being a student myself and coming from a family where post-secondary education was heavily encouraged and viewed positively, I have biases that may influence and constrain my understanding of the participants' views. I view post-secondary education as the “traditional” route that individuals take and may be more inclined to focus on the positive aspects of post-secondary education without being aware of potential negative aspects and barriers that others may face in pursuing education. I tried being mindful of my biases when interacting with the data in order to ensure that I do not impose or center my views at the expense of participants' accounts.

Results

Participants provided narratives of their journey to higher education with reference to driving forces and influential people. Across the participants' responses, there were six themes that captured the development of educational aspirations for a university degree: natural

progression, societal and parental expectation, family influence, career opportunities, role models, and emancipation through education. It is important to note that the themes presented below are not mutually exclusive, as some participants discussed either a combination of themes or multiple themes within individual responses.

Natural Progression

Many students explained that post-secondary education seemed like the natural next step in their academic journey. Natural progression captures the sequential nature of continuing from one level of education to another, specifically, the transition from high school to university. Participants fell into one of two categories: those who knew they wanted a university degree, and those who were unsure of what path to take after high school. Participants who expressed confusion about their future seemed to have chosen university as a logical default. Participant 18 explained her journey towards a university degree as a process of elimination, “I wanted to further my learning, felt too young to apply for a full-time job, did not know what else to do with myself.” Another participant who shared a similar thought process explained that, even though she did not know what to do next, she felt that university made the most sense.

This notion of university being a logical decision after high school was mirrored throughout participants’ responses. One participant insightfully reflected on what it was like to pursue university at 18 years old versus 21 years old. She contrasted her experience at 18 versus 21 and explained that, at 18, her pursuit of higher education was not fueled by desire, but instead was the result of expectation and ease of accessibility. After taking time off, she explained how her return to university reflected a long-term investment in herself. The following is a reflection of her aspirations when returning to university:

Given all the factors and characteristics about me, I was/a, very privileged such that at 18 university was an expectation and I didn't stress much about the choice as I wasn't personally paying out of pocket or taking loans. I think that as irresponsible, but after my year break and transfer/program change, my aspirations to attend university did reflect a long term investment in myself and an appreciation for the opportunity to get that education so conveniently. (Participant 17)

When discussing her educational journey, one participant explained that she never thought about her aspirations before university, but just knew it was a given that everyone attends. Similarly, other participants who discussed the natural progression towards university also provided little reflection on their aspirations. Perhaps this lack of reflection illustrates the natural expectation and assumption of post-secondary education. Since children with parents who attended university are more likely to attend university and school environments encourage students to pursue a university education (Mau & Bikos, 2000), it can be speculated that the desire and understanding may be more of an internal process with little outward discussion or reflection.

Societal and Parental Expectation of the Pursuit of Higher Education

Participants expressed that their desire for higher education was influenced by the expectations of their family and society. Many participants explained that their family's expectation was present and communicated to them from a very young age. Some participants discussed how their attitudes and beliefs about the importance of university were shaped by the environment in which they grew up. Participants explained that their environments had socialized them to believe that a university degree was not only necessary, but also the normal thing to do.

Participants further explained that the expectation of university was not only limited to the action of their parents, but also was present in the way their teachers and peers acted. Participant 30 described how the expectation for university manifested itself around her, "...it was always just all around us. a looming expectation that was put into every aspect of school or ideas about the future." She also added, "...There was never a question of *if* we were going to school after high school, but rather *where* and *for what*. [italics in original]"

Family Influence

Family was consistently discussed among participants with respect to their post-secondary aspirations. Participants discussed how their families' support and encouragement helped them develop a desire for university. Some participants explained the importance of financial support from their parents, while others discussed the value of emotional support. Participant 3 explained how the life lessons and advice from her parents played a significant role in her aspirations: "Although my parents were not highly educated (mom went to college at 40), my dad is very intelligent and they both always instilled education as a huge value in my siblings and myself."

Participants' family academic background was also discussed; those whose family members had attained college or higher level of education simply stated that their family's academic background played a role in the development of their aspirations. Alternatively, participants who explained that they were the first in their family to work towards a university degree provided much more detail about their experience and their family's experience and that their desire for university was fueled by making their family proud.

When reading participant narratives, it was evident that participants fell into one of two categories when reflecting on their experiences growing up: those who hoped to emulate their

parents' lifestyle and those who wanted more for themselves. Participants who wanted to emulate their parents' lifestyle explained that they felt that a university degree would help them maintain their current standard of living. The following is an excerpt from a participant who hoped to emulate her parents' lifestyle:

They displayed what a degree can do for someone – the opportunity and experiences it provides. I was able to witness their lifestyle and realized I want a similar lifestyle- which requires education and a career (not a job) ... Social class and witnessing family encouraged me to obtain a career where I too could be in a career position that allowed for a good salary, flexibility regarding time, etc. (Participant 20)

Another participant explained how observing her parents' lifestyle made her believe that university was necessary if she wanted a better future for herself. Participant 2 said, "My parents never made enough money in their jobs to support my family - college degrees were not enough."

Career Opportunities

The majority of participants expressed that a university degree would lead to a higher salary and better career options. Participants expressed that a university degree is necessary, right now, in order to secure any type of decent job. One participant felt strongly that, without a university degree, she would be limited to a job in the fast food industry. Another participant explained that he felt hopeful about his job satisfaction given that he would have a university degree, which would put him in a better position than his mother who did not go past high school.

When discussing their future career opportunities, a sense of personal fulfillment was evident across the participants' responses. Participants discussed that a university degree helped

them to accomplish their career goals. These career goals seemed to be major driving forces fueling aspirations for higher education because, without university, they would not be able to achieve their ideal career. One participant explained how her desire was fueled by career aspirations.

I knew I wanted to go to university early on in high school. I wanted to be a teacher, so I knew that I had to go to university before I could attend teacher's college. So my decision was based on my career aspirations. (Participant 28)

Many other participants echoed similar sentiments as participant 28. For example, participant 16 said, "I decided the career I wanted in my future needed a university degree to get where I wanted." Participant 23 said, "I have always wanted the same career choice of becoming a veterinarian and you have to go to university to do that." One participant summed up the role she believes university plays when pursuing a career like this: "To be honest, it seems like a university degree is just one step towards a career" (participant 21). Participants also discussed how the attainment of a university degree brought a sense of comfort in terms of career stability and flexibility. For them, stability was expressed in terms of job security and having an education to fall back on, and flexibility meant having a variety of career options.

Role Models

When asked about important people who may have played a role in the development of their aspirations, participants mentioned their mothers, siblings, and grandmothers. When participants discussed the role of a mother, they mentioned her academic achievements, earnings, and the support and encouragement they received from her. Some participants even described their mothers as their biggest inspiration for a university degree. Participants who mentioned their mothers discussed how they were in favour of their children pursuing higher education, and

influenced their children's choices to do so; one participant explained that her mother would not accept her taking a gap year. A few others explained how their mothers *pushed* them into higher education. One participant explained how being raised by a single parent played a role in fueling her desire for higher education, stating:

My mom always told me that I should follow my aspirations, and that I could do whatever I aimed to do, if I put in the effort...My mother encouraged me to aim high as a student... I was raised by a single mother, so perhaps that fueled my desire even more, to be able to prove people wrong. People often assume that single moms struggle to raise their children, and I had a really great childhood. I wanted to show that you don't need a typical family in order to get a degree. (Participant 45)

Some participants explained that witnessing their older siblings attending university served as a source of inspiration for them. Participants explained that visiting their sibling(s) at university or observing their siblings' academic journey made them want the same for themselves. When discussing their siblings, participants mentioned how inspiring their accomplishments were. Participant 3 explained, "My sister holds a PhD in oceanography and has done research for NASA, so she was a huge inspiration."

A few participants discussed their grandparents' role in their educational journey. Two participants specifically discussed their grandparents' direct influence on their post-secondary aspirations. One participant explained that her grandmother had always encouraged her to pursue higher education in order to avoid making the same mistakes that she did. Another participant mentioned how her grandmother inspired her through her own example; she elaborated on her dedication and persistence in the excerpt below:

My grandmother wanted to become a teacher but did not have the money to do so when she graduated high school, so she worked and in her thirties, when she had her own family and children, she finally had enough money to obtain her university degree and then her teaching degree. Her perseverance to reach her dream inspired me in reaching my dream of becoming a teacher by pursuing post-secondary studies.
(Participant 64)

Higher Education as a Means of Emancipation

When asked about their aspirations for higher education, participants discussed how a university degree brought them closer to independence, both personally and financially. While some participants discussed breaking female stereotypes, others described their desire to prove themselves as competent in various academic areas. One participant explained how university is helping her be independent and challenge the traditional female stereotype:

Even though the stereotype of females being "stay at home", I wanted to earn a degree for myself so that I would not have to depend on a spouse or man in the future, I want to be able to take care of myself. (Participant 29)

Another participant explained how her need for higher education stemmed from unequal opportunities for females:

I am a woman so I knew that it was especially important for me to get the highest amount of education possible. As bad as it sounds, there is still a lot of sexist practices and unequal opportunities for women in the workforce, so it was important to be able to better myself and make myself as competitive as I could. (Participant 47)

Interestingly, one participant discussed how attending university made more sense for her as a woman as opposed to pursuing something related to trades. Another participant pointed out that

teachers encouraged females to apply for higher education. Perhaps teachers' assumptions, actions, and classroom environment significantly impact the aspirations for university (Jodl, Michael, Malanchuk, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2001).

Discussion

The current study contributes to the literature on educational aspirations by providing a qualitative perspective on how Canadian undergraduate students make sense of their aspirations for higher education and the significant factors they believe played a role in the development of those aspirations. Seventy-one undergraduate students took part in this study and discussed the factors that they felt were important in fueling their desire for a university degree. Narratives from participants were categorized into different themes that captured patterned responses, such as natural progression, societal and parental expectations, family influence, career opportunities, role models, and emancipation.

Aligning with pre-existing literature (Garg et al., 2002; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Mau & Bikos, 2000; Spera, 2005; Teachman & Paasch, 1998; Wilson & Wilson, 1992), participants in the current study discussed parental involvement as a significant factor in the development of their university aspirations, specifically through encouragement, and support (e.g., emotional and financial). However, in contrast to previous research that discussed direct physical parental involvement within the school environment as an important factor in aspirational development (Fraser & Garg, 2012), participants in the current study did not discuss any direct parental involvement within the school context (e.g., homework help, presence at school, interactions with teachers). Perhaps this lack of discussion about parental involvement in relation to academics was the result of the participants in the current study being

university aged (average 21 years) versus grade nine or younger, thus demonstrating greater autonomy (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Hossler & Stage, 1992).

Traditionally, the role of mothers in their children's education was limited in scope to the influence of mothers' own educational attainment (Beishline, 2008; Simpson, 2003). However, mothers have been observed as playing a distinct role in their children's educational choices (Simpson, 2003). Similarly, participants in the current study discussed the distinct role that their mothers played in their post-secondary aspirations, through their sharing and storytelling (e.g., sharing their lived experience of university or explaining why they felt that their children should pursue a post-secondary education). A few participants even explained how their mothers eased their financial concerns for university. This was a novel finding as other researchers have highlighted the friendship-like relationship that participants share with their mothers (Lakshmanan, 2004), but this finding of easing financial concerns uncovers a nuance of the mother-daughter friendship in which, due to the power dynamic between mothers and daughters, daughters feel at ease discussing and being reassured in terms of finances by their mothers.

Given the surge in the number of women with post-secondary credentials and their involvement in the workforce (Statistics Canada, 2017), mothers may be serving as strong role models who are able to balance both their work and home life (Beishline, 2008). Researchers, Noller and Callan (1990), studied adolescents' perception of communication with their parents and found that the topic of conversation that had the highest self-disclosure from adolescent daughters to their mothers was future plans. Therefore, it is likely that participants reached out to their mothers when thinking about their academic and career goals, further highlighting the distinct influence of mothers, as was found by Li and Kerpeleman (2007).

In addition to mothers, participants discussed the significance of grandparents. Even-Zohar and Sharlin (2009) studied both grandparents and grandchildren to understand the role of grandchildren towards their grandparents. Their study indicated that grandchildren felt a sense of commitment towards their grandparents and that grandchildren wanted to repay them for all the support that they provided when they were younger, which may also be extended to education. Participants who mentioned their grandparents discussed how they wanted to make their grandparents proud through their educational achievement, which may be a form of repaying their grandparents.

Kemp (2005), in her qualitative study, investigated the dimensions of the grandparent-adult grandchild relationships and found that both grandparents and adult grandchildren make distinctions between their relationship and other family relationships through a key dimension of friendship. Similarly, through their narratives, it seems that participants found their grandparents to be influential because of the closeness they felt with them. Therefore, grandparents may have played an influential role in the development of aspirations for higher education due to their unique friendship. However, there are many other variables that may affect the influence of the grandparent-adult grandchild relationship in the context of educational aspirations (e.g., co-residence) (Zeng & Xie, 2014).

Previous researchers have observed that children with parents who have attained higher education are also more likely to attain higher education themselves (Christofides et al., 2008). Researchers have also further discussed that parental education attainment may be a factor involved in the educational aspirations of individuals (Shah & Sewell, 1968; Wilson & Wilson, 1992). Although participants in the current study did not directly mention the role that their parents' educational attainment had on their aspirations, there did seem to be an indirect link

between parental educational attainment and participants' aspirations because they mentioned that observation of their parents' lifestyle was a factor in their desire for university. This pursuit of a greater lifestyle than their parents' lifestyle, via attending university, helps to demonstrate the social mobility that the participants hoped to attain. Although some participants discussed achieving more than their parents, many more aspired to maintain the standard of living that their parents had provided for them, which demonstrates that upward social mobility was not the only driving force behind aspirations to attain a university degree.

Participants who wanted to achieve more than their parents support the status attainment model (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Sewell & Shah, 1967). Since participants are trying to use their degree to enhance their lifestyle, they are also influencing their social standing; however, as previously mentioned, most participants hoped to maintain their current standard of living. Given that most participants did not report aiming for an upward shift in their lifestyle, there are other factors that may be of greater importance when fueling aspirations for university, for example: career aspirations, societal and parental expectation, and/or emancipation. This difference may be accounted for because university degrees, today, hold a different value than they did in previous generations. Previously, fewer students were pursuing higher education and those who had achieved it had better outcomes as a result. The number of students pursuing post-secondary education at the undergraduate level in Canada has increased from 550,000 in 1980 to 994,000 in 2010 (AUCC, 2011). Since significantly more people are pursuing and attaining higher education than ever before, it can be speculated that, today, a university education has become normalized and may be a way to keep oneself competitive in the current economy.

In the literature, other significant factors influencing one's educational aspirations are peers and siblings. The role of siblings fit with previous research in that older siblings served as

role models for their younger siblings (Ceja, 2006; Mau & Bikos, 2000). In the current study, older siblings also shared their direct experience of university life with participants. However, contrary to previous research that siblings set the expectation for higher education (Ceja, 2006), none of the participants discussed the expectation that they attain a university degree because of their siblings attaining a university degree. Instead, many participants expressed that the expectations for a university degree were perpetuated by authoritative figures (e.g., parents and teachers), while siblings served as a resource for information, which aligns with the research conducted by Ceja (2006).

Previous research has discussed the significant role of peers in one's educational aspirations (Hossler et al., 1999). In contrast, participants in the current study explained the role of peers in terms of support rather than as a source of inspiration. There seems to be a certain window of time during which peers serve as figures that may fuel aspirations. Christofides et al. (2008) found this peer impact is pronounced in males ages 15 and 17; whereas girls ages 15-17 are influenced by their parents' confidence in their abilities in school (Christofides et al., 2008). Similar to the supportive parental role that is valued as participants age and gain more agency, perhaps peers' actions and support are valued more so during the process of higher education. The importance of support during the process of a university degree was further highlighted in the current study as participants whose peers were not on the same academic path as themselves described feelings of loneliness and isolation.

One novel finding in this study that adds to the literature of post-secondary aspirations is the theme of natural progression. Through qualitative approaches, researchers have explained that aspirations are more dynamic than was previously thought and, thus, need to be explored as such (e.g., Clair & Benjamin, 2011). Participants' responses about their aspirations indicated a

shift in student culture related to what is considered the basic level of education. Most students explained that university, for them, was a step towards achieving their career aspirations. Most participants expressed that they knew what career path they wanted to be on and that they knew they needed to complete university to get there. Furthermore, participants explained that their lack of reflection on aspirations came from knowing that they *had* to attain a university degree. Given that generations of students have evolved over time, this natural progression to university can be explained, in part, by the different values and life expectations of millennial students (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010) for whom higher education is accessible (e.g., White, non-immigrant, able-bodied individuals).

Millennials are unique in that they are considered an entitled generation of students and young professionals with their greatest career-related motivating factor being salary (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004). Interestingly, participants in this study discussed salary as a motivating factor in their desire to attend university. While some participants were transparent in their responses, others expressed their desire for certain careers, which generally have higher earnings. Because of the Millennial mindset of “wanting more and wanting it now” (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010, p. 282), participants may have spent less time reflecting on their educational aspirations and instead focused on their career aspirations, since they knew they would need a post-secondary education for future success.

This study also helps to contribute to a lesser-explored area of educational aspirations for female students: emancipation. Participants explained that their desire was fuelled by wanting to break traditional gender stereotypes, be self-sufficient, and have equal opportunities. Christofides et al. (2008) studied the evolution of aspirations and found that, in a sample of Canadian students at the age of 15, approximately 78% of females held aspirations for a post-secondary education

and the percentage rose as the sample aged. The strength of their aspirations was highlighted by 60% of the participants having followed through on their aspirations by enrolling in a post-secondary degree program by the age of 19. Therefore, it can be observed that females hold strong aspirations for higher education from an early age. In this study, participants described their aspirations for a university degree as a way to help them overcome barriers they may face as women (e.g., unequal opportunities, sexist practices) and contribute to their independence. In terms of financial independence, Moussaly-Sergieh and Vaillancourt (2009) found that investment in an undergraduate degree leads to high economic returns. In regards to breaking gender stereotypes, post-secondary education may be a good starting point to influence future opportunities leading to increased equality within the workforce.

Limitations and Future Research

Although participants shed light on their aspirations for a post-secondary education, some limitations are important to acknowledge. Since the current study involved the use of an online survey, my ability to garner deep, rich responses through prompts was lost. Students provided details about their educational journeys; however, prompts and follow up questions, which could have helped garner deeper meaning of significant factors involved in educational aspirations, could not be used. Furthermore, participants did not mention factors that have been cited by many researchers as being involved in post-secondary aspirations (e.g., personal ability and/or sociocultural factors), which may have been easier to explore through probing. Another limitation of the study was the homogeneity of my sample; most participants in my sample were white females. A white homogenous sample is a limitation because I likely tapped into a privileged population for whom university was an accessible option. Furthermore, discussion of specific factors from my participants may be unique to females. Their perspectives on

development of their aspirations may differ from members of other ethnic and racial groups.

Based on the results of this study, many areas can be further explored. For example, a qualitative, longitudinal approach of aspirations and their development across genders would help provide context as to what factors are of importance during emerging adulthood. It would be interesting to focus on gender and aspirations since women are now outnumbering men in higher education and the difference in aspirations between men and women has been observed early in grade school (Christofides et al., 2008). Furthermore, it may be beneficial to interview parents, teachers, and students, over time, to gain a comprehensive view of educational aspirational development.

Future research about diverse populations (e.g., immigrants, teen mothers, single parents, and people living in poverty or with a disability) who may experience unique barriers to post-secondary education, yet continue to aspire to university, would provide insight about aspirations, sociocultural context, and resiliency. Furthermore, qualitative work about the normalization of obtaining a post-secondary degree in the 21st century, and whether students are getting a positive return on their investment, would benefit both current and future students. Results from students' return on investment would benefit students by helping them make decisions that are more informed based on their post-secondary aspirations.

Implications and Conclusion

This study adds to the literature on educational aspirations, specifically the aspirations of Canadian undergraduate students. This was the first study to employ a strictly qualitative approach in studying the development and meaning making of Canadian undergraduate students' aspirations for higher education. By providing participants with space to outline and discuss different factors, such as significant people, events, and background characteristics, participants

provided insight about these important factors. Results from this study have various implications for stakeholders, such as policy makers, theorists, and students.

Educational policy makers can benefit from the results of this study. For example, the information can be used to better inform their high school mandates. Given that participants discussed natural progression, societal and parental expectation, and default decision-making strategies, policy makers can adapt current high school mandates to be more equitable and supportive of high school students' aspirations. A beneficial outcome may be implementing more practical experiences by means of co-operative educational opportunities across different colleges (e.g., social sciences, biological sciences, and commerce). Implementation of more practical educational opportunities providing real-life experiences and skill development would help support students in terms of being better prepared for what their employment prospects could be after a university degree. This clarity may also help participants make better decisions about whether they should be attending university or college/trades degree for their future careers. Besides co-operative educational opportunities it would be beneficial for high school students to have mandatory in-class seminars dedicated to teaching students about their post-high school options, where alumni share their experiences. It is important that high school students are equally exposed to individuals who pursued university and those who did not. The discourse around post-secondary degrees needs to be acknowledged and expanded so that students can understand the options available to them. Without the opportunity to explore other options students may always think that university is the natural next step.

Theorists can benefit from this research in terms of augmenting pre-existing models to account for changes in students across generations. Given that the status attainment model was developed four decades ago, there is a need for it to be augmented. Simpson (2003) discussed the

emphasis that the status attainment model places on paternal factors with little to no acknowledgement of maternal factors. Given the importance of mothers, as discussed by participants in this study, there needs to be equal representation of factors related to both mothers and fathers. Participants explained that a university degree is no longer something that sets someone apart but instead is something that most students feel is necessary for basic career opportunities. Augmenting the model will help to account for the change in academic pursuit and attendance over time because, instead of upward mobility, many students may be aiming to maintain their current social standing, and having a theory to help guide an understanding of why this is a current trend would be helpful. Moreover, Clair and Benjamin (2011) presented a performative model of aspirations in which they explain that academic aspirations need to be explored beyond the dimension of climbing the social ladder. Clair and Benjamin (2011) explained that aspirations need to be understood as serving an individual's own purpose where "people are doing the best they can with what is available to them" (p. 515). Additionally, they explained that an aspirational model needs to account for the dynamic and recursive process of factors (e.g., family, teachers, school environment) interacting with one another and providing feedback to the individual. This performative view of aspirations may help to explain individual differences across participants and what fueled their desire for university. Perhaps, this perspective may also help to account for why many participants wanted to maintain their current lifestyle because it was within their means and they were not concerned with increasing their social status.

Students can benefit from the results of this study through support and validation of their feelings when considering a university degree. While some participants discussed their feelings of uncertainty, others expressed their desire in terms of specific career aspirations. Students can

find support in the fact that the journey to higher education is complex and whether they decide to pursue higher education or not, they are not alone on their educational path. Students can use these results to think more critically about *why* they want a university degree to help them make a more informed decision.

With the job market's growing demand for university degrees and a shift towards a knowledge-based economy (Kuh et al., 2008), students explained how their desire for a university education was the result of a combination of factors (e.g., natural progression, societal and parental expectation, family influence, career opportunities, role models, and emancipation), with the most prominent factor being natural progression. Undergraduate students explained that their progression to university was a natural step for them in their educational journey, something they knew they had to do. This natural step from high school to university demonstrates the shift in student culture, where Millennials are striving for high-earning careers, which generally require university degrees.

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Appendix A

**RESEARCH ETHICS BOARDS**

*Certification of Ethical Acceptability of Research
Involving Human Participants*

APPROVAL PERIOD: August 4, 2016
EXPIRY DATE: August 4, 2017
REB: G
REB NUMBER: 16JL019
TYPE OF REVIEW: Delegated Type 1
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Sutherland, Olga (osutherl@uoguelph.ca)
DEPARTMENT: Family Relations & Applied Nutrition
SPONSOR(S): None
TITLE OF PROJECT: Exploring Undergraduate Students' Meanings of Post-Secondary Educational Aspirations

The members of the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board have examined the protocol which describes the participation of the human participants in the above-named research project and considers the procedures, as described by the applicant, to conform to the University's ethical standards and the Tri-Council Policy Statement, 2nd Edition.

The REB requires that researchers:

- Adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and approved by the REB.
- Receive approval from the REB for any modifications before they can be implemented.
- Report any change in the source of funding.
- Report unexpected events or incidental findings to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants, and the continuation of the protocol.
- Are responsible for ascertaining and complying with all applicable legal and regulatory requirements with respect to consent and the protection of privacy of participants in the jurisdiction of the research project.

The Principal Investigator must:

- Ensure that the ethical guidelines and approvals of facilities or institutions involved in the research are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.
- Submit a **Status Report** to the REB upon completion of the project. If the research is a multi-year project, a status report must be submitted annually prior to the expiry date. Failure to submit an annual status report will lead to your study being suspended and potentially terminated.

The approval for this protocol terminates on the EXPIRY DATE, or the term of your appointment or employment at the University of Guelph whichever comes first.

Signature:

Date: August 4, 2016

Johanna Goertz
Chair, Research Ethics Board-General

Appendix B

Email Sent to Course Instructors & Recruitment Message to Distribute to Participants

Dear Dr. X,

Dr. Olga Sutherland from the Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition and I are conducting an online, survey-based study, and we are looking for undergraduate students to participate. I noticed that you are teaching X course this term, and was wondering if you would mind if we posted a short message on your class' CourseLink page inviting students to participate. Because this is an online study, students are able to participate even if they are taking the course by distance. If you would be open to us doing this, I have attached the invitation message.

Thanks for your assistance,
 Venus Bali
 MSc FRHD Student
 Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition
 University of Guelph
 Phone: (902) 499-0821
 Email: vbali@uoguelph.ca

[attached Word .doc]:

My name is Venus Bali and I'm a Master's student in the Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition at the University of Guelph. Under the supervision of Dr. Olga Sutherland, I have initiated a research project designed to examine the topic of academic aspirations, specifically how individuals make sense of their interest in or desire to pursue a University degree and how they develop it. We are seeking your assistance in completing this study by asking you to respond to a short online survey. Your participation is voluntary. All pertinent details about the study are available in the consent form available at the link below. As a small "thank you" for participating everyone who completes a survey will be entered into a draw for one of five \$10 cash prizes. We estimate that 200 students will respond to this survey; this places the odds of winning at approximately 1 in 40. We will be pleased to share the results with you once they are compiled and answer any questions you may have. Please feel free to contact me for further information. Please visit the survey at this link:

https://uoguelph.eu.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_6J62ENzP4sFWQIZ

Thank you,

*Venus Bali
 MSc FRHD Student
 Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition
 University of Guelph
 Phone: (902) 499-0821*

Email: vbali@uoguelph.ca

*Olga Sutherland, Ph.D., C. Psych., RMFT
Associate Professor & Director
Couple & Family Therapy Program
Department of Family Relations & Applied Nutrition
CFT Centre, Rm. 252, University of Guelph
Guelph, ON N1G 2W1
Phone: [\(519\) 824-4120 ext. 56336](tel:(519)824-4120)
Fax: [\(519\) 823-7819](tel:(519)823-7819)*

Appendix C



Informed Consent Form

Project Title: Exploring Undergraduate Students' Meanings of Post-Secondary Educational Aspirations

As a University of Guelph undergraduate student you are invited to participate in a research study titled "Exploring Undergraduate Students' Meanings of Post-Secondary Educational Aspirations." This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board. This research is being conducted by Venus Bali and Dr. Olga Sutherland from the Department of Family Relations and Human Nutrition at the University of Guelph. This study is being undertaken as a thesis project, in fulfillment of the requirements for completion of a Master's of Science Degree in Family Relations and Applied Nutrition.

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please feel free to contact the supervisor of the study, Dr. Olga Sutherland at osutherl@uoguelph.ca (519-824-4120, ext. 56336) or the student investigator, Venus Bali at vbali@uoguelph.ca (902-499-0821).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the present study is to understand how undergraduate students make sense of their educational aspirations to pursue higher education. This study will explore participants' meanings concerning having educational aspirations and significant events, factors, and people that may have played a role in participants developing educational aspirations.

PROCEDURES

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete an online survey that should take approximately 30 minutes to complete but may vary according to individual. You can complete this online survey at your own convenience; the responses you provide will be automatically saved and you are able to return to the survey using the original link provided. Given the nature of qualitative research, the data may present interesting information which would be beneficial to follow-up on. You are asked to provide your e-mail address on a separate web page (different from the original survey) if you are open to being re-contacted about the topic of this research project. There are no consequences for not providing this information and you are still able to take part in this study if you choose not to be contacted. You are also still able to take part in the incentive prize lottery draw.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND/OR DISCOMFORTS

Minimal psychological/emotional risk may be present of participants feeling uncomfortable, embarrassed, anxious or upset when answering survey questions. There may be minimal social risk, risk of loss of status, privacy, and/or reputation. In order to manage any risks, the participants will be asked to contact the supervisor of the study, Dr. Olga Sutherland (osutherl@uoguelph.ca; (519) 824-4120 ext. 56336) who is also a counsellor/psychologist and

trained in addressing psychological distress. Participants do not need to answer anything that makes them feel uncomfortable and can skip the questions with no repercussions. It is our belief that you will find this experience beneficial in terms of reflection and understanding of the development of your educational aspirations to pursue higher education. This information may help successful intervention mechanisms for future university aspiring students.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

Participants may gain a better understanding of their interest and passion to pursue a university degree. This study may also advance the qualitative research that has been conducted on higher education by evaluating factors involved and students' experiences of developing aspirations.

REMUNERATION INFORMATION

As a thank you for your time, you have the option to enter a draw for a chance to win one of five \$10 cash prizes. We estimate that 200 students will respond to this survey; this places the odds of winning at approximately 1 in 40. After submitting your responses, you will be asked if you would like to enter your e-mail address into the prize draw. Information collected to draw will not be linked to the study data in any way; this identifying information will be stored completely separately and then destroyed after the draw has been completed. The amount received is taxable. It is your responsibility to report the amount received for income tax purposes. Winners will be notified by e-mail to arrange a method for delivery via electronic transfer of funds.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your responses will be anonymous as no identifying information will be collected. The survey data will be secure and collected and stored on a password-protected, encrypted website (Qualtrics.com). Qualtrics uses the same encryption type (SSL) that online banking sites use to transmit secure information and IP addresses will not be collected. Please note that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed while data are in transit over the internet. Following the completion of the project, electronic data will be erased and paper products that were associated with the data analysis will be shredded after seven years. While verbatim quotations may be used for any reports, presentation or articles based on this data, any potentially identifying information will be removed from the quotation to ensure anonymity. Data collected during this study will be stored in a locked cabinet in a private office and/or a password-protected and encrypted laptop computers of Dr. Olga Sutherland and Venus Bali. Secure erasing of electronic data and confidential shredding of paper copies of de-identified data will take place after 7 years.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study (which is indicated by clicking the "Next" button and answering the subsequent questions), you are able to withdraw at any time without any consequences up until to the point where you submit your completed survey. You will still have the opportunity to enter your e-mail in the prize draw even if you choose to withdraw by visiting the following web page: [link to prize draw URL](#). Once your survey is submitted, your data will not be able to be removed from the study because it is anonymous. Prior to submitting your completed survey, you may withdraw from the study by stopping filling out the questions and closing your web browser. Throughout the survey, you may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer (you can leave the text box

blank for the question(s) or you may select the “I choose not to answer” option) and still remain in the study. We encourage you to keep a copy of this consent information for your records. For a printable copy of this consent information, please click here: (print button).

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies because of your participation in this research study. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact:

Research Ethics Officer	Telephone: (519) 824-4120 ext. 56606
University of Guelph	E-mail: sauld@uoguelph.ca
437 University	Centre Fax: (519) 821-5236
Guelph, ON N1G 2W1	

Appendix D
Online Survey Questions

- 1) Age: 18, 19, 20...28 each number will be its own option “Other” please specify in text box”

- 2) Background: People living in Canada come from very different cultural and racial backgrounds.
Are you: (Please select all the apply)
 - White
 - Chinese
 - South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc.)
 - Black
 - Filipino
 - Latin American
 - Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Malaysian, Laotian, etc.)
 - Arab
 - West Indian (e.g., e.g., Iranian, Afghan, etc.)
 - Japanese
 - Korean
 - Aboriginal Peoples of North America (North American Indian, Métis, Inuit, etc.)
 - Other- please specify
 - Prefer not to answer

- 3) Gender
 - Male
 - Female
 - Other- please specify
 - Prefer not to answer

- 4) Were you born a Canadian Citizen?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Prefer not to answer

- 5) What is the highest level of education of your mother and/or parent/caregiver?
 - Less than grade 6 (including no schooling)
 - Completed at least grade 6
 - Completed at least grade 9 (Quebec Secondary 3)
 - Higher school diploma or equivalent
 - Some college CEGEP, or university level courses (no certificate, diploma, or degree)
 - Private business or training institute certificate or diploma

- Community college, CEGEP , trade, vocational, apprenticeship, teacher's college, or nursing diploma or certificate)
- University undergraduate certificate or diploma (below a Bachelor's degree)
- University Bachelor's degree (e.g., B.A., B.Sc., B.Ed.)
- First professional degree in Medicine, Dentistry, Veterinary Medicine, Law, Optometry or Divinity
- Master's degree (e.g., M.B.A., M.Ed., M.A., M.Sc.)
- Doctorate degree (earned e.g., Ph.D, D.Sc., D.Ed)
- Other- please specify
- Not applicable

6) If applicable, what is the highest level of education of your father and/or parent/caregiver?

- Less than grade 6 (including no schooling)
- Completed at least grade 6
- Completed at least grade 9 (Quebec Secondary 3)
- Higher school diploma or equivalent
- Some college CEGEP, or university level courses (no certificate, diploma, or degree)
- Private business or training institute certificate or diploma
- Community college, CEGEP , trade, vocational, apprenticeship, teacher's college, or nursing diploma or certificate)
- University undergraduate certificate or diploma (below a Bachelor's degree)
- University Bachelor's degree (e.g., B.A., B.Sc., B.Ed.)
- First professional degree in Medicine, Dentistry, Veterinary Medicine, Law, Optometry or Divinity
- Master's degree (e.g., M.B.A., M.Ed., M.A., M.Sc.)
- Doctorate degree (earned e.g., Ph.D, D.Sc., D.Ed)
- Other- please specify
- Not applicable

7) What are your three main sources of income? Please order the sources below with 1 being your primary source of income.

- 1Own employment earnings
- 2Personal savings
- 3Spouse/Partner
- 4Parent(s)
- 5Other people
- 6Employer
- 7Government student loans
- 8Bank/other institutional loans
- 9Credit Card(s)
- 10Line of credit
- 11Scholarships/awards/fellowship/prize

8) How many people are in your household at your permanent address?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4+
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

9) What is your average household monthly income at your permanent address (e.g. all sources of income, salaries and wages of all people in the household) before taxes while you are in school? Please include income from all sources in your calculation.

- Less than \$1200
- \$1201-\$2500
- \$2501- \$3800
- \$3801 and greater
- Prefer not to answer

1) What fueled your desire for higher education? In other words, how did you become interested in obtaining a University degree? (open-ended/text response box)

2) What does a university degree mean to you? (Open-ended/text response box)

3) Please describe any significant events or factors (e.g., social, family, cultural, personal) that played a role in you becoming interested in going to University. (Open-ended/text response box)

4) Please discuss specific events or factors that may have made it challenging for you to consider a University degree. (Open-ended/text response box)

5) Please describe people who played a role in the development of your aspirations for higher education. What made their role significant? Open-ended/text response box

6) Which, if any, of your background characteristics (sex, race, ethnicity, religion, social class, ability) may have played a role in the development of your desire to pursue a University degree? (Open-ended/text response box)

7) Please describe how you made the decision to pursue University. (Open-ended/text response box)

8) Please use the following space to share any additional information about your aspirations to attend University. (Open-ended/text response box)