2003

Educational aspirations: The role of social support and self-assessment

Bryan D. Rookey

The University of Montana

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EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT AND
SELF-ASSESSMENT

by

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B.A. Eastern Washington University. 2000

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

May 2003

Approved by:

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Chairperson

[Signature]
Dean, Graduate School

4/24/03
Date
A large body of research findings and subsequent literature supports the influence of social support on individuals' educational aspirations. Data from entering college students are used here to produce measures similar to those utilized in previous research to examine this relationship. A limited replication and a modest extension of the Wisconsin model of status attainment were performed. Contrary to expectations, results indicate that the advice of parents, peers, and school counselors are not a significant influence in the college decisions of entering freshmen. Consideration of student self-assessment of college preparedness was found to slightly influence the relationship between social support and educational aspirations when considered in the model.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis project would not have been possible without the support, guidance and inspiration of Dr. William H. McBroom. Particular thanks are due to the Office of the Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs at The University of Montana for the use of data. Thanks to Dr. James W. Burfeind and Assistant Provost Betsy Wackernagel Bach for their insight and support. I thank Mr. Chuck Harris for invaluable direction, insight and support. I would also like to thank Shari Linjala for helping me through the process and for her wisdom. Special thanks are in order to my family for all of their support and help.
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EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT AND SELF-ASSESSMENT

There are long-standing, and to some extent overlapping, research traditions dealing with occupational mobility, educational aspirations, and achievement motivation. These concepts refer respectively to gaining employment, expected educational attainment and personal forces driving success. The associated research is conducive to the success ethic dominant in U.S. culture. Attempts to understand sources of influence on individuals' success have been conducted through research on status attainment processes from micro- and macro-levels of analysis.

This research has two main objectives. The first objective is to investigate sources of influence on individual status attainment by exploring the relationship between known predictors of educational aspirations. The second objective is to investigate the affect of self-assessments of college preparedness on educational aspirations net of other influences.

BACKGROUND

Status attainment research has been conducted at psychological, social-psychological and structural levels of analysis. Psychological approaches point out personal motivations for goal attainment and success. Social-psychological approaches emphasize the important affects of social environment while
structural approaches emphasize the role of social background in explaining how people achieve their statuses.

Approaches in Status Attainment Research

Psychological approaches to understanding status attainment processes emphasize motivational dimensions presumed to underlie achievement and aspirations. For example, early in his work, David McClelland developed the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), which purports to identify individuals' motives for success in terms of motives for achievement, affiliation, and/or influence. McClelland found that motives were learned by the individual and based on affective arousal involving points on an affective continuum (McClelland 1951:226). That is, individual motives are associated with the emotional arousal dimension of social environments. The early contribution of McClelland influenced future research by emphasizing individual motives that drive success.

Social psychological approaches emphasize the social origins of how aspirations are formed by individuals. The influence of social environment on individual aspirations has been treated in social-psychological research for over 60 years. Chapman and Volkman (1939) emphasized the importance of reference frames in aspiration formation. They state, "the conditions which govern the setting of a level of aspiration, in the sense of an estimate of one's future performance in a given task, may be regarded as a special case of the
effect upon a judgment of the frame of reference within which it is executed" (Chapman and Volkmann 1939:225).

Other early studies, such as Sherif's (1936), indicate that the frame of reference "is the paradigm for the individual's interiorization of the norms, values, and standards of culture" (Chapman and Volkmann 1939:225). Further, reference groups contain significant influences on individual's aspirations and socialization. Individuals do not reside in a vacuum, free from the various influences of their social environments. Rather, social psychologists argue that social environments have substantial influence on individuals. Reference groups are thought of as the strongest source of influence and are comprised of significant others including, peers, family, teachers, and counselors among others (Hyman 1942).

Early in the research, Kelley (1947) distinguished between two functions of reference groups: the normative function of referent others, to set and enforce group standards for the person; and the comparison function, to serve as a standard or comparison point against which the person could make evaluations (Bank et al. 1990:210). Some researchers prefer to use the term significant others, to reference group, but most have conceptualized normative influence in a manner consistent with that suggested by Kelly (1947). Individuals are presumed to perceive, internalize and ultimately aspire based on a frame of reference based on occupation, social class and race.
The idea that individuals anticipate their position in the future is directly related to the perceived preparations the individual needs to accomplish the level of aspiration. A large body of literature exists on the process, outcomes, and influences of anticipatory socialization. A basic tenant of anticipatory socialization literature (Simpson 1962, Korte and Sylvester 1982, Mortimer and Simmons 1978) is that individuals anticipate and prepare themselves for future roles. In childhood, for example, "small children playing house do not merely imitate their parents; they rehearse in advance roles they will play in the future" (Clausen 1968:8). Later in life, after aspirations are formed, anticipatory socialization occurs when individuals seek traditional pathways to success by going to college, or seek other occupational training.

The notion of ambition as a personal attribute with its own trajectory is central to the success ethic dominant in U.S. culture. In this culture, "aspirations are not fixed but evolve as they are buffered by the experiences of young individuals in educational and employment settings . . . that in American society (and others like it), a high level of aspiration prevails among adolescents, aspirations cannot be completely satisfied by the available positions" (Jacobs et al. 1991:610). Merton's (1938) classic statement asserts that in American society, the only officially recognized barriers to success are personal: the guiding ethos encourages everyone to aim for the top, though clearly not all can reach it. Even though high aspiration levels may go unfulfilled, the strong relationship existing between aspirations and attainment is not disputed.
In an early series of studies, William H. Sewell and colleagues found that social-psychological variables were critical to the process of social mobility and status attainment. Sewell, Haller and Ohlendorf state, “perhaps the most important single finding [from their research] . . . is the critical role of significant others’ influence in the status attainment process” (1970:1025). Aspirations are the central component in a social psychological theory of attainment (Sewell 1975; Sewell et al. 1969; Sewell et al. 1970; Sewell and Hauser 1992).

Micro-level approaches to the attainment process emphasize the social nature in which individuals’ motives and aspirations are formed. Sewell and his colleagues discovered that social-psychological factors were, in fact, strong sources of influence on status attainment but these sources did not account for all variation in attainment. The combination of social-psychological and structural variables is a reasonable method to explain additional variation in individual status attainment (Kerckhoff 1995:477).

In contrast to these approaches, structural approaches to status attainment emphasize the contributions of social background and educational attainment to placement in the status hierarchy. The basic status attainment model, developed by Blau and Duncan (1967), “provided a means of including multiple sources of influence in a coherent representation of the status attainment process” (Kerckhoff 1995:477). Their model represents four stages of the status attainment process: socioeconomic status of origin, educational attainment, first job, and later job. Subsequent research has effectively
elaborated this basic model, helping to clarify how social influences affect the attainment process.

The Wisconsin Model of Status Attainment

Between 1967 and 1980, Sewell and colleagues developed the Wisconsin model of status attainment, which has become one of the standards of sociological research on status attainment. The Wisconsin model attempts to explain the effects of ability, ambition and encouragement from significant others on educational attainment while considering the effects of social background. The model stresses that an important part of the association between background and outcomes is due to socialization processes that lead children from different status backgrounds to plan for and move toward different status goals (Jacobs et al. 1991). The work of Blau and Duncan, as well as that of Sewell and his colleagues generated substantial interest in the status attainment process. Their findings lead to a method of standardized categorization of occupational origins and destinations known as the "seventeen fold-table" in the study of social mobility and status attainment.

Beginning with their work in 1957 and continuing through 1968, Sewell and colleagues determined that educational aspirations are the single most important variable having direct effects on education levels actually attained. Using educational aspiration as a predictor of education attained, Sewell measured individual aspirations in conjunction with measures of social status
(Sewell, Haller and Straus 1957), community of residence (Sewell, Haller and Straus 1957; Sewell 1964), neighborhood context (Sewell and Armer 1966), socioeconomic status and intelligence (Sewell and Shah 1967), and parents' education (Sewell and Shah 1968a; Sewell and Shah 1968b). The major findings from the research suggests that "significant others," including parents, peers, and teachers strongly affect the educational and occupational aspirations of adolescents (Sewell, Haller and Portes 1969). The work of Sewell and the legacy of the Wisconsin model of educational attainment have continued to influence research.

Following the publication of research papers on the Wisconsin status attainment model were "more than 500 subsequent papers that have attempted to replicate, explicate, extend or dispute the basic findings" (Campbell 1983:47). The model has been replicated on several national samples, several more state or local samples and on at least five international samples, including studies from Costa Rica, Brazil, Israel, Canada, the Netherlands and Japan. No study to date has seriously disputed the basic empirical findings of the Wisconsin model (Campbell 1983:49).

An example of research that partially replicates the Wisconsin model is the work of Alexander and Griffin (1975) and Wilson and Portes (1975). They conducted parallel studies that analyzed similar variables to those considered in the Wisconsin model. Further research has been conducted to investigate the role of family (Teachman and Paasch 1998; Teachman 1987) and interpersonal
influences (Buchmann and Dalton 2002) in the formation of individuals’
educational aspirations. Major findings of this research again indicate that
significant others constitute elements of social support, which provide a positive
influence on educational aspirations. The major findings of the vast majority of
parallel analysis indicate that the basic relationships in the Wisconsin model are
robust (Kerckhoff 1995:479).

As used here, social support refers specifically to the positive influence of
significant others. At the very least, social support exists when an actor shares
the like opinions of others. Social support also exists when significant others
from the individuals reference group are engaged in an influential and supportive
relationship with the individual. Thus, significant others constitute resources for
success and achievement. As will be seen in subsequent sections, parents,
peers, teachers, and school counselors are the relevant significant others that
encourage and support individuals educational aspirations.

Since educational aspirations are strongly influenced by elements of social
support, the nature of the relationship is important. One way in which
researchers have investigated this relationship is through socialization research.
Research of socialization processes attempt to explain the nature of the
relationship by emphasizing intergenerational value transmission.

From a socialization perspective, the argument that parents transmit
values to their children seems reasonable. Most theories of socialization regard
the family as a primary socialization agent where a substantial amount of social
learning takes place due to the nature of family relations and the vast amount of time spent together. Despite these assumptions, while the research “research has found only modest relationships between parent and child attitudes and values, previous findings do suggest factors consistent with the thesis of value transmission.” (McBroom et al. 1985:150).

Further research has been conducted to investigate the role of family (Teachman and Paasch 1998; Teachman 1987) and interpersonal influences (Buchmann and Dalton 2002) in the formation of individuals’ educational aspirations. Major findings of this research indicate that significant others constitute elements of social support, which provide positive influence on educational aspirations. Using data on sibling pairs, Teachman and Paasch (1998) conclude that families are closely linked to the educational aspirations of children. They state that:

There are several reasons why families should be associated with variation in educational aspirations . . . First, families are sources of genetically determined academic potential . . . Second, families represent micro-social environments that influence how children experience the larger social world . . . Third, families provide children with larger social environments that effect how they view education. Through their choice of neighborhoods and schools, parents provide children with physical resources and patterns of peer and adult relationships that affect their academic achievement (Teachman and Paasch 1998:704-05).

Allied Research Traditions

Investigation of sources of influence on educational aspirations is not limited to psychological, social-psychological and structural levels of analysis. Research traditions in delinquency and higher education also emphasize the
important influence of social support on educational aspirations. While the
outcomes of such research traditions differ substantially, the fundamental
relationship between social support and educational aspirations remains.

Travis Hirschi sought to investigate educational aspirations as aspects of
the social control theory of delinquency. Seeking to identify causes of
delinquency, Hirschi developed social bond theory. This theory begins with the
assumption that “delinquent acts result when an individual’s bond to society is
week or broken” (1969:18). Hirschi specifies four elements to the social bond:
attachment, commitment, involvement and belief. Hirschi refers to the
commitment element of the bond as the “rational component in conformity”
(Hirschi 1969:21). Commitment to conventional lines of action in status
attainment involves commitment to education achievement in adolescence
through young adulthood. Hirschi (1969) postulates children who have high
educational aspirations, who have good grades, and who say they work hard in
school (indication of high commitment) also are unlikely to pursue delinquent
activities.

The attachment element of the social bond refers specifically to
attachment to parents, peers and school. “If a person does not care about the
wishes and expectations of other people—that he is insensitive to the opinion of
others—then he is to that extent not bound by the norms. He is free to deviate”
(Hirschi 1969:18). Conversely, when attachments to school parents and peers
are high, the probability of delinquency is reduced. Other criminologists
interested in prevention strategies of serious and violence juvenile offending
emphasize the importance of a commitment bond to schooling and attachment to
school as a protective factor against crime and violence (Catalano and Hawkins
of adolescents indicate that low levels of educational aspiration, at ages 14 and
16 accurately predicted violent behavior at age 18.

Research based on social bond theory uses similar elements of social
support and aspirations to those considered in status attainment research but the
outcome variables differ. The major differences in outcomes are related because
delinquency is correlated with low occupational and educational achievement.

In a parallel tradition, research conducted on higher education also
recognizes the influence of social support on educational aspirations. Using
similar data, research in this area has uncovered some salient concepts useful
for understanding and conceptualizing the possible implications that educational
aspirations have for college student retention. A long-standing theme in the
research on college student retention, attrition, and persistence, has been the
degree to which parents, peers and teachers or school counselors affect
students' decisions for leaving or staying in college. Elements of social support
(parents, peers, and teachers) that have been found to influence individuals
reasons to seek higher education also have been found to influence the reasons
individuals leave college.
Studies of social support and student attrition tend to focus on the influence of peers, parents and teachers. Studies, which investigate peer influence on attrition, have "failed to provide consistent support for the suggestion" that "decisions to drop out of college are affected by peers' acceptance or the degree to which a student participates in peer relationships and forms close relations" (Bank et al. 1990:208).

The amount of contact the student has with faculty, the student's evaluation of the faculty and the amount of satisfaction with these interactions have been the most common measures used to assess the influences of faculty on the attrition of students. Tinto (1982) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1977) argued that faculty-student contacts are an important component of both the academic and social integration of students, which, in turn, are important predictors of the attrition of students (Bank et al. 1990:209).

Parental influence on students' persistence has been assessed not by the frequency or quality of contact but by measuring the characteristics of parents and parenting practices. Bank and colleagues report that "parents continue to be actively involved in the lives of their college-age children and that these children take their parents' expectations and behaviors into account in formulating their own educational goals" (Bank et al. 1990:210).
Self-Assessment of College Preparedness

Self-assessment of preparedness is potentially important because students who report strong social support and high educational aspirations may not be prepared for college. Thus, self-assessment of college preparedness may have an effect on educational aspirations independent of social support. Investigation of self-assessment of college preparedness is warranted for two reasons. First, students who aspire to high levels of education may not be well prepared to achieve these goals. Despite positive influences of social support, aspiration may very well be unrealistic by the level of preparation of students. If a student is not prepared, the relationship between social support and aspirations may be reduced. Second, self-assessment of college preparedness has not been treated as a variable of considerable interest in previous research on status attainment. Because of this, the affects of self-assessment of college preparedness and social support on educational aspirations are unknown.

In order to clarify the importance of incorporating self-assessments of college preparedness, it is necessary to summarize some of the research conducted involving academic self-assessment. A defining aspect of the research is the evaluation of the agreement between academic and performance self-assessments and achievement. Falchikov and Baud performed a critical review of student self-assessment literature that included 48 quantitative studies in the "examination of differences between student and teacher marks when assessing the same student performance" (Falchikov and Boud 1989:395). A
major finding from their meta-analysis is that accuracy of assessment increases when students have more educational experience. That is, students in the third and fourth years of college were able to give more accurate self-assessments of academic performance than students in their first or second year of college. Other findings from similar research indicate that academic self-assessments may be partially self-maintaining. That is, academic self-assessments “will lead people who have high self-concepts . . . to believe they succeed more and fail less, even when actual performances are similar” (Gerardi 1990:402).

The distinction between self-assessments of academic performance and self-assessment of college preparedness is not made explicit in self-assessment literature. This should not be of great concern because it is intuitively justified that individuals are equally accurate in making predictions of performance and preparedness. For example, if a student predicts and obtains in a high mark in a high school advanced mathematics course, it is likely that self-assessment of college preparedness in mathematics is also accurate.

In sum, findings from research on the academic self-assessments of college students indicate that more experienced students give more accurate self-assessments of academic performance than their inexperienced counterparts. Additionally, academic self-assessments have been found to be self-maintaining. Self-assessments of academic preparedness have not been a variable of considerable importance in previous research. However, it is logical
that predictions regarding academic performance are just as accurate as self-assessments of academic preparedness.

PROBLEM FOR INVESTIGATION

Sewell determined that educational aspirations are the single most important variable having direct effects on education levels actually attained. By investigating sources of influence on educational aspirations, an increased understanding of the status attainment process is possible. A limited replication of the work of Sewell and his colleagues is carried out by examination of the role of social support of parents, peers, and school counselor on self-reported educational goals. Consideration of the influence of self-assessment of college preparedness on educational aspirations net of other influences represents a modest extension of the Wisconsin model of status attainment. The research question is "How, if at all does self-assessment of college preparedness effect the relationship between social support and educational aspirations?"

DATA AND METHODS

The data were derived from a study conducted for the Office of the Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs at the University of Montana*.

* The author is grateful to Assistant Provost Bach, Provost Muir and the Office of Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs at the University of Montana for granting use of data derived from the Entering Student Survey.
The goal of that study was to gain information from entering freshman students about reasons for coming to college, influences on their decision, levels of academic preparedness, and demographic information. The questionnaire was developed to meet the needs and interests of the Office of Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs.

The research here represents secondary data analysis. The data are based on responses from a self-administered survey given to 2,656 entering freshmen at the University of Montana. Data were collected at each of nine on-campus freshman orientation sessions in the fourteen-month period between June 14, 2001 and August 28, 2002. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to entering students who attended the "academic expectations" lecture portion of each orientation session. Respondents were given instructions to answer all of the questions and return questionnaires to the survey administrator upon leaving the room. The four-page questionnaire (see Appendix) includes fifty-six items and was completed by respondents in approximately ten minutes.

The dependent variable is the students' stated educational goals. The measure taps educational aspirations and is derived from responses to the following question: "What is the highest academic degree you expect to obtain at any institution?" Response alternatives were: "1" (none); "2" (vocational or technical certificate); "3" (associate degree, A.A. or equivalent); "3" (bachelor's
degree, B.A., B.S., etc); "5" (master’s degree, M.A., M.S., etc); "6" (doctoral or professional degree, Ph.D., J.D.) or "7" (other).

The measure of educational aspirations is consistent with that used by Sewell and his colleagues. They measured educational aspiration based on the students’ response “that he definitely planned to enroll in a degree granting university.” “The responses were dichotomized into ‘High’ for those who planned on college and ‘Low’ for all others” (Sewell and Shah 1968a; Sewell and Shah 1968b).

There are three indicators of social support that are used as independent variables in this study. Measurement of social support is based on student responses to three survey items that focus on referents that influenced their decision to come to the University of Montana. Social support is measured by the degree to which students’ decisions were influenced by the advice of parents, school counselors and friends. Parental support is tapped by the response to the indicator “advice of my parent(s).” Response values range from “1” (strong influence on my decision) to "6" (no influence on my decision). The support of peers and school counselors are measured on the same scale, which includes the indicators “friends attending UM” and “advice of school counselor,” respectively.

These variables are consistent with those of Sewell and his colleagues who used data from a survey of all graduating male seniors in all public, private and parochial high schools in Wisconsin. However, social support was
measured by Sewell and those who replicated his work by a "composite index that groups together the indicators of parental, peer, and teachers' influence" (Davies and Kandel 1981:364). That is, measurement of social support was derived from responses of students indicating the perceived degree of support from relevant significant others. Response values were transformed to constitute an index of perceived support. Davies and Kandel argue that the treatment of interpersonal variables as a composite index limits "understanding of the social psychology of adolescent development and the formation of aspirations" (1981:364). These "theoretical considerations require that the influences of parents and peers be examined and discussed separately" (1981:365). By measuring social support using three indicators of the influence of significant others in this research, it is then possible to discuss the separate effects of parents, friends, and school counselors on educational aspirations net of other influences.

In addition to measures of social support, the data set also contains students' estimates of their academic preparedness for college. Sewell and his colleagues did not consider this concept in their status attainment research. Thus, including self-assessment of college preparedness in analysis provides a modest extension of Wisconsin model of status attainment.

Measurement of self-assessment of college preparedness is based on students' self-reported preparedness in each of eight academic areas. Each indicator represents an academic category relevant to standard core
preparedness expected in college level academics. The survey item to be used reads "All things considered, how well prepared do you feel right now in the following areas?" Students rated their preparedness from "1" (extremely well prepared) to "6" (not prepared at all) in the areas of mathematics, science, history and social studies, writing skills, study skills, public speaking skills and listening skills. The direction of these scales are not consistent with the direction of the dependent variable and thus, interpretation of signs was difficult.

Social support and self-assessment of college preparedness variables were recoded in order to have intuitively meaningful signs in the analysis. By recoding each variable from low to high, the direction of independent variables and the dependent variable is the same. The influence of the advice of parents, peers and school counselor were originally rated on a six-point scale with low scores representing high influence on the students' decision. Similarly, self-assessment of college preparedness was rated in eight areas of core academics where low score represent high self-assessment of college preparedness. On all indicators, low scores refer to low values and high scores refer to high values.

As the initial step in the analysis, the operating or scale-like quality of these indicators was examined. While there are eight questionnaire items of self-assessment of college preparedness, it is not known whether or not they represent a single dimension. Accordingly, inter-item correlations were calculated from the self-assessment of college preparedness variables that produced coefficients ranging from .02 to .64 as shown in Table 1 (below). All of
the inter-item correlations are significant at or below the .01 level. That extremely slight associations are statistically significant is due to the large number cases in the analysis.

Table 1. Inter-Item Correlations for Self-Assessment of College Preparedness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Assessment Variables</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Math</td>
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<td>2. Science</td>
<td>.477</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. History and Social Studies</td>
<td>.146</td>
<td>.377</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reading Skills</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>.163</td>
<td>.379</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Writing Skills</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td>.158</td>
<td>.351</td>
<td>.642</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Study Skills</td>
<td>.214</td>
<td>.205</td>
<td>.218</td>
<td>.278</td>
<td>.359</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Listening Skills</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>.153</td>
<td>.211</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.307</td>
<td>.356</td>
<td>.257</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All correlations are significant at or below the .01 level.

Given moderate correlations between some items, factor analysis was performed on all eight measures self-assessment of college preparedness variables. Table 2 (below) indicates that the eight variables form two distinct factors. The items loading strongly on the first factor are mathematics and science preparedness and items loading on the second factor are history and social studies, study skills, public speaking skills and listening skills.

The items in Table 2 were subject to reliability analysis. Component 1 yields an alpha of .64 and accounts for 35.3 percent of the total explained variance. Component 2 yields an alpha of .73 and accounts for an additional
17.4 percent of the total explained variance. Considered together, components 1 and 2 account for 52.7 percent of the total explained variance.

Table 2. Factor Loadings for Self-Assessment College Preparedness.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Assessment Variables</th>
<th>Factor Loadings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Component 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>.848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>.809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History &amp; Social Studies</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading Skills</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Writing Skills</td>
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<td>Study Skills</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Public Speaking Skills</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Listening Skills</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation

These findings warrant the construction of a scale that measures self-assessment of college preparedness. Scale construction was achieved by adding across items. These scales are called "math-science self-assessment of college preparedness" and "general education self-assessment of college preparedness," respectively. The self-assessment of math-science college preparedness scale has both a theoretical and observed range of "2" to "12" with a mean of 7.23 and a standard deviation of 2.3. The self-assessment of general college preparedness scale has both a theoretical and observed range of "6" to "36" with a mean of 25.6 and a standard deviation of 4.95. Low values in either scale indicate low self-assessments of college preparedness. Thus, considering
the recodes mentioned above, all variables use large values to indicate high educational aspirations, academic preparedness and influence of parents, friends, and school counselor.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The major purpose of this research is to investigate the influence of social support and self-assessment of college preparedness on self-reported educational goals. The analysis used ordinary least-squares regression separately in two models.

The first regression model, as shown in Figure 1 (below) predicts educational aspirations from the three indicators of social support (advice of parents, peers, and school counselor). The model is similar to a portion of the Wisconsin model of status attainment and thus is a partial replication.

Parents

School counselor → Educational aspiration

Peers

Figure 1. Social Support and Educational Aspiration.

It was initially expected that social support accounts for a substantial amount of the total explained variance in educational aspirations based on the
robust findings of previous research. However, model one shows that less than one percent (adjusted $R^2 = .001$) of the total variation in educational aspirations can explained by social support. Standardized regression coefficients shown in Table 3 (below) indicate that social support variables have little impact on educational aspirations net of other influences. Model one provides a partial replication of the Wisconsin model of status attainment but does not support it.

Table 3. Model One: Social Support Regressed on Highest Degree Expected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (Constant)</td>
<td>4.893</td>
<td>.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice of parents</td>
<td>-.014</td>
<td>.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice of school counselor</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends attending UM</td>
<td>-.021</td>
<td>.011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was also expected that advice of parents, friends and school counselors are positively related to educational aspirations based on previous research. Contrary to these expectations, results of regression analysis in model one shows that "advice of parents" ($\beta = -.028$) and "friends attending UM" ($\beta = -.040$) are negatively related to educational aspirations. In addition, "advice of parents" and "advice of school counselor" are not statistically significant. Only "friends
attending UM” is statistically significant at the .05 level. There is no evident relationship between “advice of school counselor” and educational aspirations. Findings reported in model one are uncharacteristic considering the robust findings of previous research.

In the second regression model, social support variables are retained and self-assessment indicators of college preparedness are added. This provides a modest extension of the work of Sewell and the Wisconsin Model because self-assessment of college preparedness was not considered in the previous research. Model two allows interpretation of total explained variation in educational aspirations attributable to self-assessment of college preparedness net of the influence of social support.

Parents

School counselor

Peers

Math-science self-assessments

General education

Self-assessments

Educational aspiration

Figure 2. Model Two: The Impact of Social Support and Self-Assessment of College Preparedness on Educational Aspirations
Since previous research has not included measures of self-assessment of college preparedness in analysis, the effect of these variables are unknown. Results from regression analysis in model two indicate that social support and self-assessments of college preparedness accounts for 4.8 percent of the total variation in educational aspirations (adjusted $R^2 = .048$). The total variance explained by social support in model one was approximately .1 percent. By including self-assessment of college preparedness, the explained variance in educational aspirations increases from .1 percent to 4.8 percent.

Table 4. Model Two: Social Support and Self-Assessment of College Preparedness Scales Regressed on Highest Degree Expected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 (Constant)</td>
<td>3.901 .115</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice of parents</td>
<td>-.024 .012</td>
<td>-.049 .040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice of school counselor</td>
<td>-.003 .013</td>
<td>-.005 .822</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends attending UM</td>
<td>-.014 .011</td>
<td>-.029 .189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math-science self-assessment of college preparedness scale</td>
<td>.050 .008</td>
<td>.135 .000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General education self-assessment of college preparedness scale</td>
<td>.025 .004</td>
<td>.142 .000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The second regression model takes into account social support variables and self-assessment of college preparedness separately in relation to educational aspirations as shown in Table 4 (above). Social support variables remain negatively related to educational aspirations taking into account self-assessment of college preparedness. It is expected that social support is positively related to educational aspiration net of other influences. However, separate measures of social support are all negatively related to educational aspirations when self-assessment of college preparedness is considered in analysis. It is important to note that "advice of parents" is now statistically significant (p<.05) when self-assessment of college preparedness variables are included.

A positive relationship exists between both measures of self-assessment of college preparedness and educational aspirations. Math-science self-assessment of preparedness has a standardized regression coefficient of .135 (β= .135) and general education self-assessment of college preparedness has a standardized regression coefficient of .142 (β= .142). Both measures of self-assessment of college preparedness are significant at or below the .01 level.

**SUMMARY**

The research question is "How, if at all does self-assessment of college preparedness affect the relationship between social support and educational aspirations?" The positive relationship between social support and educational
aspirations is strongly supported by a large amount of research and subsequent body of literature. The first objective was aimed at replication of previous work. Findings have not evidenced a statistically significant relationship between measures of social support and educational aspirations. Rather, findings indicate a negative relationship between the advice of parents and educational aspirations. Similarly, the relationship between advice of peers and educational aspirations is negative. There is no apparent relationship between advice of school counselor and educational aspirations. Taking all social support variables into consideration reveals that social support variables together account for less than one percent of the total variation in the dependent variable.

The second major objective was to extend the scope of previous research by taking previously unconsidered variables into account. By adding measures of self-assessment of college preparedness to the independent variables in the regression model, the proportion of the total variance explained increased from .001 to .048. This means that by looking at social support and self-assessment of college preparedness together, it is possible to explain more variation in educational aspirations.

Self-assessment of college preparedness, net of other influences, are positively related to educational aspirations. That is, when self-assessments increase, educational aspirations increase slightly. Furthermore, when taking into account self-assessment of college preparedness, "advice of parents" (β = -.049) has more negative influence on educational aspirations. Similarly,
"advice of school counselor" ($\beta = -0.005$) shows a slight negative increase in influence on educational aspirations. The peer aspect of social support ($\beta = -0.029$) has less negative influence educational aspirations when self-assessments of college preparedness are included in analysis.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The main task has been to investigate the role of social support and self-assessment of college preparedness on educational aspirations. However, this research, for the most part, finds little support for the relationship between social support and educational aspirations, but it does not by any means warrant the dismissal of the findings from an entire research tradition in this area. The Wisconsin model of status attainment is far more complex than the limited replication undertaken here.

Results of this nature initiate questioning of measurement techniques. The measure of social support used may not, in fact, be a good indicator of social support or interpersonal influences. The questionnaire items used to indicate social support are worded in context of possible influences on the decision to attend the University of Montana. It is quite possible that the measures of social support used indicate another dimension than is represented in this thesis. A better test of the ideas surrounding social support and how mechanisms of social support influence educational aspirations is needed.
The measurement validity of self-assessment of college preparedness is also suspect. Previous studies have found that students make more accurate self-assessments of performance as they had more experience in school. Since most entering freshmen students are inexperienced by definition, self-assessment of preparedness for many respondents may in fact be inaccurate.

The relationship found to exist between social support and educational aspirations is negative. However, when self-assessment of college preparedness and social support are regressed on educational aspirations, the negative influence of social support increases. This indicates that self-assessment of college preparedness has some influence on the relationship between social support and educational aspirations. While the influence may not be strong, it invites further investigation.

Understanding sources of influence on educational aspirations is an important aspect of research traditions, including the ones discussed previously. By understanding sources of influence in the status attainment processes, it is possible to develop strategies to equip individuals with skills to pursue individual goals. Given increased time and funding, additional research could be conducted on different sample populations in anticipation of better understanding the sources of influence on educational aspirations.
APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE
These questions are intended to provide information for enrollment and program planning purposes. Please complete and return the questionnaire now (during this session). In most cases you need only mark your response(s) or insert a brief comment. Thank you.

Orientation Questionnaire

TODAY'S DATE:

Educational Decisions and Plans

A1. When did you actually decide to attend college (any college/university)?
(Circle the number of your response.)

1... Before grade 7
2... During middle school or junior high (grades 7-9)
3... During sophomore or junior year in high school
4... During senior year
5... After your senior year
6... Other (explain): ____________________________________________

A2. Where does The University of Montana-Missoula (UM) rank as your college/university of choice? (Circle the number of your response.)

1... First choice (of several)
2... Second choice
3... Third choice
4... Fourth choice
5... Fifth choice or higher
6... Only choice

A3. All things considered, how important is it to you to graduate from college?
(Circle the number of your response.)

1... Very important    2... Somewhat important
3... Not too important 4... Not important at all
A4. What is the highest academic degree you expect to obtain at any institution? (Circle the number of your response.)

1... None
2... Vocational or technical certificate
3... Associate degree (A.A, A.A.S., etc.)
4... Bachelor's degree (B.A., B.S., etc.)
5... Master's degree (M.A., M.S., etc.)
6... Doctoral or professional degree (Ph.D., J.D., etc.)
7... Other (specify): ________________________________

A5. What are your educational plans or expectations here at UM? (Circle the number of the one BEST response.)

01... To graduate UM with a vocational or technical certificate
02... To graduate UM with an associate degree (A.A., A.A.S., or equivalent)
03... To graduate UM with a bachelor's degree (B.A., B.S., etc.)
04... To graduate UM with a master's degree (M.A., M.S., etc.)
05... To graduate UM with a doctorate or professional degree (Ph.D., Ed.D., J.D., Pham., etc.)
07... To take my general education courses at UM and then transfer elsewhere (please answer A6)
08... To take some UM courses I want for personal/professional development and go back to work
88... Other plans/expectations (please explain): ________________________________

A6. (ONLY IF YOU ANSWERED 07 ABOVE IN A5) If you expect to transfer later to another college or university to finish your first degree (or just think you probably will):

A6a. How many semesters do you expect to be at The University of Montana? ________
A6b. What college/university will you most likely transfer to? ________
Your Decision to Attend the University of Montana now

B. Listed below are a number of factors that might influence a person's choice of schools. For each one, please indicate whether it had any influence on your decision to attend UM. Record the appropriate number for each factor, using the following scale (or 7 for not applicable):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strong Influence On My Decision</th>
<th>No Influence On Decision At All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>7 = Not applicable in my case</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

____ B1. Size of the UM campus
____ B2. Number of students enrolled; size of the student population
____ B3. Academic reputation of UM
____ B4. Entrance requirements for UM
____ B5. Availability of academic scholarships (Presidential, Cal Murphy, etc.)
____ B6. Availability of grants and fee waivers
____ B7. Availability of work-study
____ B8. Advice of my parent(s)
____ B9. Advice of a school counselor
____ B10. Advice of someone already attending UM
____ B11. Reputation of the faculty (or certain faculty) at UM
____ B12. Close to my home
____ B13. Away or far from my home
____ B14. Friend(s) attending UM
____ B15. UM's reputation in intercollegiate athletics
____ B16. My visit(s) to the UM campus
____ B17. How people treated me during my campus visit(s)
____ B18. Outdoor life, outdoor recreation
____ B19. Cultural opportunities and diversity
____ B20. Campus setting and appearance

-33-
Your Decision to Attend the University of Montana now

B. Listed below are a number of factors that might influence a person's choice of schools. For each one, please indicate whether it had any influence on your decision to attend UM. Record the appropriate number for each factor, using the following scale (or 7 for not applicable):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strong Influence</th>
<th>No Influence On Decision At All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Safety and security of UM's campus environment
2. Contact with admissions representatives
3. Contact with faculty
4. Other factor (specify): 5. Other factor

B26. Have you had any contact with any UM faculty prior to Orientation? (Circle the appropriate response for each type of contact.)

YES   NO   (A) E-mail contact
YES   NO   (B) A letter from a faculty member
YES   NO   (C) Telephone contact
YES   NO   (D) Personal contact

Plans While at UM

C1. Will you be attending UM as a full-time or part-time student? (Circle the number of your response.)

1... Full-time student 2... Part-time student
8... Undecided; not sure yet

C2. Where do you expect or plan to live while attending UM? (Circle the number of your response.)

1... On campus (list dormitory name, if known):
2... Off campus, in Missoula
3... Off campus, outside Missoula
C3. Do you intend to work (for pay) while attending UM? (Circle the number of your response.)
   1… Yes  →  CONTINUE TO C4  2… No  →  Go to C6
   3… Not sure yet  →  Go to C6

C4. Approximate number of hours per week you expect to be working:
   ____________________ hours per week

C5. Do you expect to be working on campus or off campus? (Circle the number of your response.)
   1… On campus only  2… Off campus only
   3… Both on and off campus

C6. Do you expect to be doing any volunteer (unpaid) work?
   1… Yes  2… No  8… Undecided

**PREPARATION FOR COLLEGE**

D. All things considered, how well prepared do you feel right now in the following areas? Record the appropriate number for each category, using the following scale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extremely Well Prepared</th>
<th>Not Prepared At All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   ___D1. MATHEMATICS   ___D5. WRITING SKILLS
   ___D2. SCIENCE       ___D6. STUDY SKILLS
   ___D3. HISTORY AND SOCIAL STUDIES ___D7. PUBLIC SPEAKING SKILLS
   ___D4. READING SKILLS ___D8. LISTENING SKILLS

**DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

E1. Your age: ____________________ years

E2. Your gender:
   1… Male  2… Female

E3. UM student ID number:  -35-
E4. Montana residency status:

1.... Montana resident
2.... Nonresident

E5. How concerned are you about your ability to finance your college education?

1... Extremely concerned
2... Somewhat concerned
3... Not too concerned
4... Not concerned at all
REFERENCES


