This summer I worked with Professor Nelson and Melody Moon (class of 2015) on a research project on higher education for Maine students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and rural areas. We analyzed interviews with 43 young adults to understand how these students were able to graduate from college, and why they choose to stay in Maine. Last summer Professor Nelson and two students wrote a paper on the high school experience of these students and this summer Melody and I focused on their college experiences. Our main research questions were: what are the sources of support respondents drew on during college? How does socioeconomic background affect their college experiences? How were they able to overcome any struggles they encountered in college?

In order to organize all the information in the interviews and find patterns, we used a program called “NVivo” to create codes and separate parts of the interviews into different categories. For example, we created a code called Influential Adults and after we highlighted and coded any information the respondents gave in their interviews on Influential Adults we could choose to only see the information on Influential Adults in all of the interviews. By isolating the Influential Adults code we were able to see if there was something the respondents kept mentioning and record it. We created several codes like this one and after coding all 43 interviews we read each code by itself and started writing notes on any patterns we found.

After finding important patterns in the codes we created more categories which we then put into a spreadsheet where we could manipulate our data and see the relationship different codes had to each other. For example, after reading through the Influential Adults code we created two different categories for Influential Adults: “Professors” and “Other influential Adult.” We found that more than half of the influential adults (65%) the respondents mentioned were professors. We were also able to relate this code to other categories like gender and found that 44% of women who had an influential adult mentioned this adult was “other college staff” (not a professor) in comparison to 8% of men, and thus found that the men in our sample were less likely to have an influential adult that was a professor than the women.

After writing about the effect that these codes had on each other we went back to the interviews. By using the spreadsheet, we found that students who were first generation college students were more likely to have a job where they did manual labor versus a job that boosted their resume in comparison to non-first generation students. But why did this happen? Referring back to the interviews helped us answer this question.

This summer we were able to answer some of the questions Professor Nelson’s research asked. We found that influential adults were a very important source of support for almost all respondents (88%) and that they provided a type of support which the respondents didn’t mention their parents gave them, like connecting them to campus resources, giving career advice, and providing help filling out applications. We also found differences in the way students in our sample experienced college. Low income students were more likely to work more hours, have a job that conflicted with their studies, go to a public college, get into debt, be first generation, and have a job where they did manual work than the other students in our sample. We hope to continue doing this research after this summer and eventually write a paper to submit to an academic journal.

Faculty mentor: Professor Ingrid Nelson

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