



Understanding the Conditions for Postsecondary Success

Potholes Case Studies and Analysis Exercise

The case studies included in the *Potholes* research report highlight ten students who struggled at different points in the postsecondary planning process. The corresponding analysis exercise can help Counselors and other educators analyze the case studies and collectively think about the implications for practice.

Three case studies are included in this Toolkit. To read all of the case studies, [click here >>](#)



CONSORTIUM ON
CHICAGO SCHOOL RESEARCH
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Case Studies

From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College



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Clara—A Case Study

Making her hard work pay off all by herself

Can it be assumed that smart, motivated students can manage the postsecondary planning process just fine on their own? Clara shows that, when it comes to college planning, even the best students in a school can go almost unnoticed by adults.

From the first semester of her freshman year until the day she walked across the stage at graduation, Clara¹ was the one of the top students in her class at Ellison High School. She graduated from the IB program with a weighted GPA of 4.7 and an ACT score of 24. Her stellar high school performance afforded her the opportunity to attend not only a very selective school but almost any college or university in the country. Clara's teachers confirmed her academic ability. Her English teacher described her as: "A rare individual. The only problem or weakness I see in this student is the pressure she places on herself." Her math teacher said: "She has extremely high expectations of herself and has a strong work ethic that allows her to meet her high standards. At the same time, she always helps her peers." Clara was a prolific writer of fiction and poetry, for which she won numerous awards, including some scholarships. In the minds of her teachers, peers, and family, there were few doors not open to this remarkable young woman.

Clara lived with both her parents and younger sister. Although Clara's parents, who are of Puerto Rican descent, had virtually no experience with college, Clara made it clear her mother was her greatest ally in college planning. Clara's mother insisted that Clara attend a "good school," but neither Clara nor her mother was sure what schools are considered "good."

Junior Year: An Active but Uninformed College Search

During the spring of her junior year, Clara was clear about her intent to go to a four-year college but had a hard time describing her ideal college. She did, however, know that she wanted to stay in Chicago so she could continue to live at home and that she preferred a small college. And while Clara had never taken an art class

in high school, she wanted to study art and design. When asked why she said:

"I'm not really sure what [graphic design] consists of. I just know it's like you're designing. There's this website and you make your own pages with all these codes, and I did it and I liked the results. And that's why I really want to go into graphic design."

By the end of junior year, Clara's plan was to study art or design at a school where she could take a variety of courses. A teacher had encouraged her to attend a more comprehensive college than an art and design school. Clara liked this idea because it would allow her to experiment with different kinds of courses. In the end, though, her list of colleges was the same as many of her less-qualified peers, including schools like Northeastern Illinois University, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Loyola University. Clara wasn't excited about attending any of them.

Summer: Doing Her Research Campus by Campus

Clara's mother was as active as Clara in the process of college search and selection. Every time Clara mentioned a college that she was interested in attending, her mother insisted on driving to the campus for a tour and even sitting in on classes. Clara and her mother visited several colleges over the summer, and Clara completed a week of classes at the Illinois Institute of Art.

Fall Senior Year: Making Up Her Mind

In the fall of her senior year, Clara continued a college search that was extensive, but not well directed. Clara spoke casually with her teachers about her college plans, but she had not spoken with a counselor or had a

serious conversation about her college choices with any educator at her school. Clara reported an incident in the counseling office when she was trying to figure out the difference between official and unofficial transcripts:

“Everyone’s so grouchy . . . in the [counseling] office. I guess I can understand, because they wouldn’t remember one single application, but I don’t know . . . they could be more approachable.”

Clara invested significant time and energy in completing applications to about eight schools. Many of Clara’s peers in the IB program struggled to balance the demands of rigorous IB culminating projects and the college application process. Clara got everything done on time—even submitting applications for Loyola and Columbia College in Chicago (a nonselective four-year college) by the priority deadlines—without her school work suffering. In the fall, Clara said she planned to attend Columbia “*for sure*.” She toured the school, enjoyed the atmosphere and downtown location, and knew she could study graphic design.

Winter Senior Year: Changing Her Mind

During her winter interview, Clara said she changed her mind and decided to “*definitely*” attend Loyola, again based largely on having toured the campus and sat in on a class there, which she enjoyed. She was accepted to Loyola and Columbia, and Loyola offered her a merit-based scholarship to cover some of her tuition. Though Clara had no problem completing her college applications, she was overwhelmed by the process of applying for financial aid. She was familiar with tax documents because she helped her parents complete their forms, but she was confused by certain questions on the FAFSA. Clara was confident she’d figure it out and complete her financial aid applications by April or May. She never met with a counselor.

Spring Senior Year: Changing Her Mind Again

Clara changed her mind about which college to attend one more time before graduation, and finally planned to attend a small, in-state liberal arts school ranked as somewhat selective.² Spring of her senior year was the first time she ever mentioned this school:

Interviewer: [That school] is not on this list. Last time you said Loyola, UIC, and Columbia . . . [laughing] What happened?

Clara: [Laughing] [My mom and I] passed by the school, and I’m like, ‘This is a nice school. What is that?’ So my mom started looking up stuff. She [told me], ‘I think you’d like this school.’ And so we looked at it, the web page and then we signed up for the tour. I really love this school.

Clara was one of the top five students in her graduating class, but she never considered applying to a very selective college. Apparently, no one steered her to one either. Her teachers recognized that she was a remarkable young woman, but she never spoke to a counselor and never seriously discussed her plans for the future with any adult at her school.

Not surprisingly, Clara was accepted at all the institutions to which she applied. Though her confusion over financial aid looked like it might have been a serious stumbling block when she discussed it in February, Clara ended up figuring out financial aid, presumably with the help of her new college, and she did end up receiving enough federal, institutional, and private scholarship money to make her college education affordable for her and her family.³ Clara’s IB coursework and test scores helped place her into advanced freshmen courses at her college. In the fall, she was thoroughly engaged as an English major and very happy with her college choice.

With the help of an exceptionally involved parent, Clara managed to find her way to a school that made her feel at home, took care of her as a first-generation college student, and promised to support her academic ambitions throughout college. It is also apparent that this choice was arrived at through no small amount of luck, with Clara and her mother accidentally happening upon a college that proved a good fit for Clara. With such limited guidance from her school, it is easy to imagine how Clara’s story might not have had such a positive ending.

Endnotes for this case study can be found on page 96.

Javier—A Case Study

When schools talk about college, students listen

How closely do students listen to the messages schools convey about postsecondary education? Javier, a quiet teen with a strong drive to attend college and excellent academic qualifications, illustrates how first-generation college-goers depend on their schools to provide postsecondary guidance.

A Mexican-American student born and raised in Chicago, Javier¹ graduated from Silverstein High School with a 3.95 weighted GPA and a 21 on the ACT, earning him access to a selective college. Javier—with an easygoing nature and genuine desire to learn—thrived in the classroom. His teacher described him as “very gifted . . . his reading, writing, and composition skills are superior. He is focused, motivated and a true pleasure to have in class.” Like many other well-qualified students, Javier managed to apply to multiple colleges, but without guidance, this wasn’t enough to ensure he would consider colleges that matched his qualifications.

Junior Year: Seeking the Right Information

Javier and his entire family expected that he would attend a four-year college. He believed college would make life easier. Javier’s drafting teacher, a former architect, often talked to the class about college requirements and deadlines. Javier was very invested in this class and spoke at length with his teacher, who provided him with career guidance, including information about internship opportunities. From that point on, Javier was set on becoming an architect.

Javier chose a rigorous senior year course schedule to prepare to attend a four-year college. He enrolled in AP English and honors college algebra.

“I chose math because I just couldn’t see next year without math, I would be all confused the first year of college. I think colleges are looking for the students that take challenges.”

Javier also participated in a program in his junior and senior years that allowed him to earn college credit

by taking a computer information technology class at Northwestern Business College every Saturday morning. At the end of junior year, Javier started researching colleges on the Internet, but his college search was limited to schools he heard about on television or who sent him information.

Fall Senior Year: Confused Search, Diligent Applications

Javier returned to school from summer vacation and continued to struggle to understand how the college search process worked. Applying to college was new territory for him and his family, so he needed all the help he could get: “*I don’t know anything about college, so information is information.*” He listened intently to his teachers as they shared scholarship information and important deadlines, but they never talked to him one-on-one about college. As advised, he retook the ACT and improved his score from a 19 to a 21. He never spoke with a counselor about his postsecondary plans. He explained:

“She doesn’t talk to us individually. We could go talk to her, but . . . she’s always busy.”

Even without personalized help, Javier eagerly participated in the college search process with what limited information he had. He now planned to study computer engineering and diligently researched application deadlines and admissions requirements on the Internet. However, he still was only able to identify a few college possibilities and couldn’t answer why he believed those schools would be a good choice for him.

Despite his lack of information, Javier was ahead of the game with his applications. By November, he had already applied to three schools, all far below his

match: DeVry University, Robert Morris College, and Northwestern Business College. Javier continued to attend classes at Northwestern Business College and was rewarded with an \$11,000 scholarship for completing the program and having a GPA over 3.5.⁶ This would cover the bulk of his tuition, but he would still be responsible for a few thousand dollars. Even with the scholarship, he was still concerned about paying for college. He believed that the bulk of his tuition should be paid for through independent scholarships, so he put great energy into searching the Internet for scholarships. Javier also expected to take out loans but hadn't begun to make sense of how to do this. When he spoke to his mother about tuition, she told him not to worry about the cost, but he still saw it as a barrier:

“[My parents] told me...money isn't an issue, but I think it is. So I'm trying to pick a college that would make it easier for my family.”

Javier would be the first in his family to pursue higher education. Although his parents couldn't offer specific advice as he searched for colleges, they always supported his decision to attend college.

Winter Senior Year: Now What?

By February, Javier was at a standstill. He hadn't researched or applied to any additional colleges. All three colleges he applied to had accepted him, but he was ambivalent about which he wanted to attend, even though Northwestern Business College had offered him a scholarship. He put the college decision on the back burner while he waited for his parents to finish filing their taxes so he could complete the FAFSA. He figured he'd decide after the financial aid letters arrived.

Spring Senior Year: A Choice He Understands

At the end of senior year, Javier shifted gears again. His drafting teacher brought in a representative from the Universal Technical Institute (UTI), a local automotive and diesel repair school with an 18-month job certification program. Right away, Javier became very interested in an automotive repair career. After the presentation, Javier asked the UTI representative for his

card, contacted him, and the representative arranged a meeting at Javier's home. During this home visit, Javier filled out the application and was soon accepted. His parents were supportive of their son's decision. Javier never visited UTI, but it seemed like a practical option and he latched onto it.

“I decided to go to UTI because I was more interested in the program, and it's less time. The other colleges would have been three or four years. I just want to get the studies over with and go to work.”

This was the first time an adult sat down and asked Javier specific questions about college and walked him through the steps to apply and enroll in school. UTI also offered the small class size that Javier preferred and would help him find a job while in school. No other college provided Javier with information and attention like UTI.

At that point, Javier decided the cost of the school was no longer a concern. To cover the \$23,000 tuition, Javier would continue to work part-time and was assured that UTI would help him find a higher paying job when classes started. He reported that the school gave him modest financial aid: \$1,900 for books and supplies. He was still waiting to hear back about his FAFSA, and UTI told Javier they would “*check into it.*” It is unclear whether or not he applied for financial aid correctly and why he chose UTI over Northwestern Business College, where he had already received a substantial scholarship. UTI seemed to be a safe choice; he had someone who had taken an interest in his future and personally walked him through the process.

During high school, Javier attended presentations by four postsecondary institutions—the only four schools to which he applied. Javier's college search barely went beyond these four schools and never included even one selective college. Javier is an example of an intelligent, motivated student whose limited information prevented him from completing a thorough search for a match school. A one-on-one conversation with an adult at school who recognized his academic potential could have altered his outcome dramatically, ensuring he at least considered schools he was qualified to attend.

Franklin—A Case Study

A successful search with modest qualifications

Does a student have to be highly qualified to thoroughly engage in the college search and application process? Franklin demonstrates that with the right information, strong supports at home, and a drive to attend college, a student with modest qualifications can make a college match—and a successful transition.

A charismatic African-American student at Ellison High School, Franklin¹ graduated with a B average and an ACT score of 19, giving him access to a somewhat selective college. Since many of the colleges in Illinois are considered somewhat selective, Franklin was at an advantage in finding a match school. His thoughtful, extroverted nature brought enthusiasm to his baseball team and a liveliness to the classroom. When asked about his future, Franklin never wavered in his desire to attend a four-year college. To Franklin, success meant some day owning a music production company, and he demonstrated his commitment to this goal by spending countless hours in his cousin's recording studio. He planned to major in business.

Though Franklin was committed to his schoolwork, he did not achieve the highest grades. Teachers and staff at Ellison knew Franklin well and recognized his potential to mature. His English teacher described him as “lively, funny, and creative . . . he very much needs to hear that he has potential, not only in the music world but also academically.” Another teacher nominated him for a leadership program, and Franklin took his role as a leader seriously.

Junior Year: Ahead of the Game With His Search

Unlike most students, Franklin knew his way around a college campus because he spent many weekends with his brother, a Northern Illinois University student. Franklin liked Northern and could see himself as a student there, but he hesitated to follow in his brother's footsteps.

Thanks to his family's guidance, Franklin never seemed overwhelmed by the college search process, a problem that stymied so many of his peers. In the fall, Franklin started making a list of possible colleges,

including Northern, the University of Illinois, and Illinois State University. He zeroed in on schools that offered a business major and the opportunity to play baseball. Franklin's brother played an important role in his search, and his mother pushed him to attend college outside the Chicago area.

Franklin knew his grades were crucial for college acceptance, and he worked harder in his junior year classes than he had in previous years. He took a business class, improved his writing, and relished the challenge of his AP and honors classes:

“Colleges, they look at that and see [me] getting As and Bs in honors classes . . . and [they say], ‘I think he can do well in a college class.’”

Franklin completed his junior year feeling confident about his achievements and his decisions for senior year. After careful thought, he decided not to take a math class during his senior year; instead, he decided to take a class in which he was sure to earn an A or B in order to keep his GPA high.

Summer: A Little Work, a Little Play

Over the summer, Franklin spent many hours working on his music at his cousin's recording studio. At his mother's suggestion, he got a job at the library—which he held throughout his senior year and felt strengthened his “*people skills*.” He also attended baseball camps around the Midwest, including one camp at Ohio University. While there, Franklin decided to add Ohio University to his list of possible schools. For Franklin, a pattern was emerging: each college campus he visited made its way onto his college list.

Fall Senior Year: Relying on Family, Honing His List

In the fall, Franklin carefully narrowed his list. School brochures accumulated, and Franklin diligently read each piece of mail. He fell behind schedule because he spent more time looking at applications than filling them out. He said:

“I’m not going to rush to make a decision. I’m going to apply to many different schools because I don’t want to get stuck and focus on one university and that doesn’t go through.”

Franklin recognized which schools were realistic for him and considered schools he knew matched his qualifications, as well as a few “reach schools.” Franklin was aware that colleges look beyond academic qualifications and also consider a student’s personal qualities. He knew it would be important to portray himself well in his essays.

Despite all of his hard work, Franklin had not spent much time talking to adults in his school. He had not visited his counselor, but he knew he needed to do so to obtain his transcripts. Although he always sought his mother’s counsel, his main source of guidance was his brother who Franklin credited with providing the best advice about how to pick the right school.

When it came to financing college, Franklin was in a better position than many of his peers. Franklin’s mother and brother both were attending college and had experience with applying for financial aid. Franklin’s mother assured him she would handle it, which he reported she did in February. The cost of college never intimidated Franklin; he felt comfortable taking on college loans to attend the school of his choice. He and his mother spoke often about the cost of college, and they both agreed he would attend college no matter what it took. If it took him 30 years to pay off his college debt, he was OK with that. Above all, he wanted to identify a college he could both enjoy and afford.

Winter Senior Year: Finding His Favorites

Late in the fall, Franklin visited a friend at Southern Illinois University. He immediately felt comfortable

there and added Southern to his list—in fact, he moved it to the top. Because Franklin applied primarily to state schools with less complex applications, he was able to start and finish his applications in January and not miss any deadlines. He worked on his personal statement in his business class and submitted it to his two top schools. Before applying, he had asked both his teacher and mother to read his essay. In total, Franklin applied to seven schools.

Spring Senior Year: Filling in the Final Details

By the end of his senior year, Franklin had taken all the necessary steps to ensure he would attend college. While he did not always meet priority deadlines, he still applied early enough to gain acceptance to all seven schools. One final campus visit sold Franklin on attending Southern. He liked the environment and location of the university, felt comfortable among the students, liked the business program, and could afford the tuition. By spring, Franklin had already attended orientation, spoken with business professors, and registered for classes. Overall, Franklin felt his high school did a good job preparing students for college, but the responsibility for following through largely fell to the student:

“It was like we couldn’t always rely on them being there to help us through every little step, even though the guidance is good, but still as a student you still have to push forward and get it done.”

Franklin did not know the specifics of his financial aid package but knew he was in good shape.⁷ Because he would be the third person in his family enrolled in college, he was offered an aid package that made it affordable for him to attend Southern. At the end of senior year, he had met his goals of graduating on time and getting all As except for one B. By fall after graduation, Franklin was happily enrolled at Southern and active in campus life. He played intramural baseball, joined a business fraternity, and worked at a radio station. Franklin was a rare example of a student who navigated the college process successfully and landed in a well-matched college.

Case Studies Analysis Exercise

The Analysis Exercise can be used during school team meetings to discuss the *Potholes* report Case Studies. Teams can divide into small groups to read different case studies and answer the following questions. Someone from each small group should take notes and prepare to share with the larger group.

<p>Share this student’s college match story in one minute or less.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were his or her aspirations? • What kind of colleges could he or she have enrolled in? • Where did he or she end up? 	<p>Notes</p>
<p>What strengths did the student have regarding college planning and/or during the transition to college?</p>	<p>Notes</p>
<p>What would this student have needed in order to make a better transition to college? What was he or she missing? Specifically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What INFORMATION was the student lacking? • What RESOURCES seemed to be missing? • What SUPPORT could the student have benefited from if it was available to him or her? 	<p>Notes</p>