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Exploring Student Loan Borrower's Financial Decisions after Florida Enacted Statute 1009.45

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
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Abstract

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MBA, Florida Atlantic University, 2012

BS, Everglades University, 2009

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Florida implemented Statute 1009.45 as of July 1, 2017, to require colleges and universities to provide annual student loan debt notifications to students to inform them about their student loan obligations. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine how college students in the State of Florida make financial decisions about their education, with a focus on the influence of the notifications and what additional supports would help them improve their decision-making**.** There was a gap in the literature in identifying what information students were using from the notification. Rational choice and human capital theories were used for the conceptual frameworks. Both theories provided details on how and why individuals make decisions about their current and future status. The research question attempted to identify what student loan borrowers report as important when making financial decisions about their education and how they use the information on the notification. Ten participants were interviewed who were 18 or older, were undergraduate or graduate students at a college in Florida, and borrowed federal student loans between 2018 and 2022. Collected data were coded in search of categories, subcategories, and emergent themes. The finding showed that students support Statute 1009.45; however, there is a gap in delivering and presenting the notification to students. To effect positive change, the results may be used to provide political leaders, higher education leaders, and other stakeholders in Florida with information to assess some positive and negative aspects of Statute 1009.4. This study was important because of student loan debt's financial impact on borrowers and the economy.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Kathy Perez. Kathy was my stepdaughter and the main reason my dream of obtaining a doctoral degree became a reality. She was my constant cheerleader, especially when my world seemed broken. Kathy was the sunshine in my life and a reflection of everything beautiful. She was perfect in every way, and she continues to inspire me every day to be like her, kind, caring, and of service to others. She was my greatest inspiration in life, and in death, she is leading me to my highest aspirations, and forever she will live in every corner of my heart. LOVEUKP.

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I want to thank my family and friends for their encouragement and support throughout my doctoral journey.

I especially want to thank Santiago Perez. He is the most intelligent person I know, and I hope to emulate him one day. His kindness extends beyond my imagination, and because of this, I am forever grateful for him. He was my foundation during this doctoral journey, and he continues to be the rock I reach for in all aspects of life. His continued support and kindness were never-ending, and, like Kathy, Santiago is the other reason my dream of obtaining a doctoral degree became a reality.

I want to acknowledge my current Committee Chair, Dr. Leilani Gjellstad, for her dedication to guiding and supporting me through this process. Ten months ago, I felt hopeless and disheartened about completing my proposal. Like a shining star, Dr. Gjellstad came into my path and shed her light, and now I have completed my dissertation. I will forever be grateful to Dr. Gjellstad.

Dr. Nancy Williams has been nothing less than a positive force in the past eight months. She agreed to step in as my methodologist and was patient and supportive.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The United States student loan debt has reached $1.5 trillion, owed by 45 million Americans (U.S. Department of Education, 2020a). Student loan debt can carry long-term financial consequences, especially for college graduates entering the labor market for the first time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018a). According to the Federal Reserve (2019), 54% of adults who attended a higher education institution in 2018 borrowed student loans to pay for their education, and two out of 10 students with outstanding student loan balances were delinquent with monthly payments in the same year.

Federal student loans are made available to qualifying individuals who complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), along with other federal and institutional financial aid documents, and attend a higher education institution that participates in the federal financial aid program (U.S. Department of Education, 2020d). The process can be quick and straightforward for college students because of the institution's administrative staff and online tools provided by the U.S. Department of Education; however, thoroughly understanding the terms and agreements of these loans can be difficult for many. According to Akers and Chingos (2014), many college students are unaware of their student loan balances and estimated monthly repayments after leaving school. Moreover, one main reason students drop out of college is the lack of support in understanding their financial aid packages and student loan debt (Salinas & Hidrowoh, 2018).

Lawmakers at the federal and state levels are identifying opportunities to help borrowers reduce, understand, and manage their student loan debt. The ‘Pay as You Earn’ student loan repayment plan is an example of a federal program created for borrowers with high monthly payments compared to their income (U.S. Department of Education, 2020b). The ‘Public Service Loan Forgiveness program’ is another federal repayment program implemented to aid borrowers with student loan debt if employed by a United States federal, state, local, or tribal government or not-for-profit organization (U.S. Department of Education, 2020c). Several states’ lawmakers have enacted or proposed laws and programs to help manage student debt and affordability, and some states have introduced tuition-free college for the first two years of undergraduate school (College Promise, 2019). The collective student loan debt balance increases concerns about how 45 million Americans burdened with debt can positively contribute to the economy and society.

The aim of this study was to examine how college students in the State of Florida make financial decisions about their education, with a focus on the influence of student loan debt notifications and what additional supports would help them improve their decision-making**.** In Chapter 1, I introduce the study by analyzing and describing the background of the problem. The study’s purpose and significance are examined, followed by the research question and the three subquestions that guided the study. The study’s frameworks, nature, definitions, assumptions, scope, limitations, and significance are also summarized.

Background

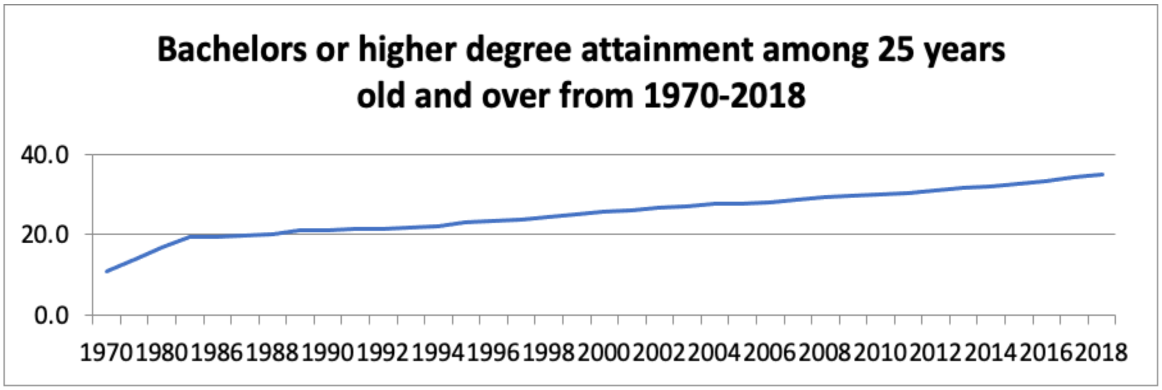
The U.S. Secretary of Education John B. King Jr. (as cited in U.S. Department of Education, 2016b) stated,

> America's path to progress has long depended on our nation's colleges and universities, and today, that's truer than ever when a college degree is increasingly a ticket to 21st-century careers and a secure middle-class life or better; higher education is the gateway to opportunity for all people.

Based on King's assertion, higher education is desired by many as a means for a better life and, in many cases, a requirement to access high-level job opportunities. President Obama stated that by earning a college degree, individuals would make the best possible investment in their future and the future of America (White House, 2012). The White House record also reflects that Obama stated that the single best predictor of success is a good education. The public demand for higher education has continued to grow throughout the years. The bachelor's degree attainment rate among individuals 25 years old and over has increased from 11% in 1970 to 35% in 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018b). Figure 1, developed with statistical data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2018b), displays a continuous percentage of incline for bachelor's or higher degrees attained among 25 years old and over from 1970–2018.

Figure 1

Percentage of Bachelor's or Higher Degree Attained



As the demand for higher education increased, so did the cost of tuition and fees. President Obama described in one of his speeches that over the last 20 years, college price has more than doubled and increased even faster than health care costs (White House, 2012). According to the U.S. House of Representatives (2019), the cost of attending public colleges soared in recent years while the median household income increased by 12%, and the net cost of attending college increased by 81% from 1990 to 2015. The U.S. House of Representatives also stated that the maximum Pell Grant covered 76% of the cost of attending a 4-year public college in 1980, but in 2019, the full Pell grant only covered 29%. There are many reasons why college costs have increased throughout the years; however, the decrease in state investments in higher education was most significant. According to Kvaal and Thompson (2020), a leading contributor to college students' increased financial burden is the continual decline of state funding for higher education. A decade ago, states paid approximately two-thirds of the cost of higher education, and in recent years states paid less than one-third of the cost, which more than doubled the remaining cost for students (U.S. House of Representatives). As higher education costs continue to outpace household income and Pell Grants, along with reduced state funding, many students rely on student loans to pay for their educational expenses.

Higher education positively contributes to society and the lives of individuals. According to Tandberg et al. (2018), on a societal level, higher education makes available an educated labor force and provides individuals opportunities for personal development, fulfillment, and economic mobility. Students and their families recognize that higher education is critical for their future, employers correlate educated workers with high productivity, and most policymakers understand that increased education attainment is vital for economic growth and shared prosperity (Kvaal & Thompson, 2020). However, to obtain higher education and compete in the marketplace, students encounter high tuition and fees because of the increasing cost of college. As a result, millions of students borrow student loans to cover education expenses.

The Federal Reserve (2019) report on United States households' economic well-being identified that over 50% of young adults borrowed student loans to pay for their education, and over 20% of borrowers who attended private for-profit institutions are delinquent on student loans. Student loans make up the second-largest consumer debt, behind mortgage debts, according to Hanson (2021). Many younger individuals wrestling with the responsibilities and consequences of having student loan debt are delaying purchasing homes, cars, and other consumptions that would otherwise stimulate the economy (Hansen & Shaw, 2020). Furthermore, the consequences of student loan debt extend beyond the borrowers as it affects short-term financial stability, is a roadblock to long-term financial security, influences career and life decisions, impedes career advancement and employee retention, and creates a risk to the broader economy (Hansen & Shaw, 2020). According to Larkin (2017), college debt will be an unprecedented crisis for the next generation’s finances and the nation’s economy.

In the attempt to remedy student loan debt and affordability, there are bi-partisan conversations for regulations at the federal level; however, no recent federal laws have been implemented (Bidwell, 2018). Some states, such as New York and Florida, have enacted laws or proposed student loan debt and affordability regulations. New York’s previous governor, Andrew Cuomo, proposed new reforms to ease student loan debt (New York State, 2017). Florida enacted Statute 1009.45 requiring higher education institutions to provide to their students an annual student loan debt notification (SB 396 Student Loan Debt, 2017). A sample of an annual student loan debt notification from a university located in Florida is in Appendix A.

Moreover, according to College Promise (2018), over 200 college promise programs have been implemented across 44 states, and 24 states have enacted laws for free college programs. Policymakers and practitioners implemented many programs and laws to remedy the increasing national student loan debt and make higher education affordable; however, college costs remain pricey for many, and student loan debt continues to increase yearly. This study was critical because the law implemented in Florida to provide comprehensive information for college students to make informed financial decisions about their education must be evaluated to determine if it has a positive impact.

Statement of the Problem

Although Florida enacted Statute 1009.45, and higher education institutions have enforced the law by providing the annual student loan debt notifications to students, there was a gap in the literature to evaluate what information students were using from the notifications to make informed financial decisions about their education. This study filled the gap in the current literature by examining how college students in the state of Florida make financial decisions about their education, with a focus on the influence of the annual student loan debt notification required by Statute 1009.45 and what additional supports would help them improve their decision-making**.**

According to data about colleges and universities throughout the United States, Florida had a 38% increase in average student loan debt per borrower between 2007 and 2017 (Brown, 2019). Martin (2019) from the Tampa Bay Times reported that Florida's total student loan debt was $75.9 billion, owed by 2.2 million Floridians. Florida enacted Statute 1009.45 as of July 1, 2017 (Florida Senate, 2018), to require individual colleges and universities to provide annual student loan debt notifications to all students who borrowed federal student loans. According to Statute 1009.45, the notification includes loan information such as an estimated total amount expected to borrow for the program of enrollment, the estimated monthly payments to repay after graduating, and the balance borrowed as of date.

The late Senator Dorothy Hukill of Florida wrote the senate bill for Statute 1009.45. According to Senator Hukill (as cited in Space Coast Daily, 2017), students need to be informed about their student loan debt and the cost for the life of the loan, similar to buying a car or a house. The law intended to inform students about their student loan obligations. According to Johnson et al. (2016), most student loan borrowers do not know many details about their student loans.

In addition to information about financial aid, students need assistance understanding student loans and the process (Scott-Clayton, 2015). Florida Senator Aaron Bean (as cited in Space Coast Daily, 2017) described how Statute 1009.45 would force schools to provide their students with essential information needed to make informed fiscally-responsible decisions regarding student loans. As student loan debt increases, policymakers and practitioners must implement effective ways to regulate student loan debt and affordability. If laws such as Statute 1009.45 are not evaluated for their intended purpose, then the laws could be deemed useless.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine how college students in the State of Florida make financial decisions about their education, with a focus on the influence of the student loan debt notifications and what additional supports would help them improve their decision-making**.** Specifically, the study explored how the information on the annual student loan debt notification assisted students in making informed financial decisions about their education. Furthermore, the study identified how the students received the notifications and if the university counseled them. According to

Klepfer et al. (2015), in general, consumers who are effectively counseled understand and retain information over an extended period; furthermore, they incorporate that information into their decision-making. However, according to Hoffower (2020), more than 25% of millennial borrowers said they did not understand their student loan packages. Furthermore, over 40% of borrowers have no idea what their future monthly repayments will be, and consequently, they are often shocked by a large amount of debt they owe when repayments start (Zhang et al., 2020). The study included students from Florida's colleges and universities that were required to uphold Statute 1009.45.

Research Question

This study has one research question and three subquestions.

RQ: What do student loan borrowers report as being important when they make financial decisions about their education?

Subquestion 1: How did students use the information they gleaned from the annual student loan debt notification?

Subquestion 2: How did the information change their view/behavior with respect to their education?

Subquestion 3: What additional support would help students make sound financial decisions related to their education?

Conceptual Framework for the Study

This study used two theories for the conceptual frameworks: the rational choice theory, and the human capital theory. Both theories provided details on how and why individuals make decisions about their current and future status. According to Levin and

Milgrom (2004), rational choice is “the process of determining what options are available and then choosing the most preferred one according to some consistent criterion” (p._1). The rational choice theoretical framework was used to evaluate how college students were using the annual student loan debt notifications required by Statute 1009.45 to make informed financial decisions about their education. Researchers found that loans play a systematic role in student enrollment behaviors, sometimes negatively and sometimes positively (Hillman, 2015).

According to Sweetland (2015), human capital posits that human endeavors such as obtaining a higher education constitute an investment because it creates capital that supports future gains for individuals and society. According to Hillman (2015), some students are discouraged from pursuing graduate education because of student loans; however, other students are encouraged to enroll in graduate school because of student loan availability. Hillman stated that, despite the conflicting results, it is plausible that undergraduates who borrow loans could be willing to continue borrowing for graduate school if they believe the returns are adequately strong. Additional information about both theories is found in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study was suited for a basic qualitative approach. Qualitative research generally attempts to understand how people see, view, approach, and experience the world and how they make meaning of their experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this study, I examined how college students in the State of Florida make financial decisions about their education, with a focus on the influence of the annual student loan debt notification required by Statute 1009.45 and what additional supports would help them improve their decision-making**.**

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a basic qualitative approach is best suited for studying "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 24); therefore, in this basic qualitative study, I interviewed 10 student loan borrowers to examine how college students in the State of Florida make financial decisions about their education, with a focus on the influence of the annual student loan debt notification required by Statute 1009.45 and what additional supports would help them improve their decision-making**.** The participants were 18 years of age and older and borrowed federal student loans during the 2018–2019, 2019–2020, and 2020–2021 award years. I looked for emerging themes in the dataset, and the findings were validated. The emerging themes were used to assess whether Statute 1009.45 could be deemed credible for providing comprehensive information for students to make informed financial decisions about their education.

Definition of Terms

In this study, the following key terms were used:

College promise: A nonprofit organization that creates public support for free college tuition of post-secondary education at quality educational institutions (College Promise, 2020).

Cost of attendance: The annual cost of attending a college or university. The cost includes items such as tuition, room and board, fees, books, transportation, and supplies. (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Entrance counseling: A requirement to receive a federal student loan. The purpose of the entrance counseling is to help students understand the financial responsibilities of borrowing student loans. (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b).

FAFSA: The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a federal application for financial aid. (U.S. Department of Education, 2020d.).

Federal Student Aid ID: A username and password that serves as a legal signature on the Federal Student Aid's online system and gives access to individuals to complete forms such as the FAFSA, loan applications, and the entrance counseling. (U.S. Department of Education, 2020d).

Federal student loan limits: Undergraduates can borrow up to $57,500, and graduate or professional students can borrow $138,500 in subsidized and unsubsidized loans. The student can apply for a PLUS loan if the subsidized or unsubsidized loan limits are depleted. (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a.).

Federal Student Loan Program: Include three types of loans; direct subsidized loans, direct unsubsidized loans, and direct PLUS loans. (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a).

Financial aid: Funding to pay for college includes grants, scholarships, loans, and work-study programs. A FAFSA must be completed and submitted to the U.S. Department of Education to be eligible for financial aid. (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a).

Free money theory: The idea that excessive relevant cost is a positive thing for schools; however, the cost should be paid with “free money.” The theory described free money as scholarships, grants, and donations (Kimball, 2014).

Revenue theory of cost: Howard Bowen’s theory about the financial trends of higher education. The idea is that higher education institutions will spend everything they have and will need to increase revenue; therefore, they will increase the cost to attend (Kimball, 2014).

Statute 1009.45: A Florida law requiring certain colleges and universities to provide their student loan borrowers with annual student loan notifications (Florida Senate, 2018).

U.S. Department of Education: U.S. Department of Education is a federal agency that establishes policies for the federal student aid program, distributes financial aid to participating schools for eligible students, and regulates some activities at participating higher education institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a).

Assumptions

In this study, I assumed participants were truthful when answering all questions, including their personal financial information and student loan debt. I also assumed borrowers were not embarrassed or uncomfortable to reveal if they lacked understanding of the annual student loan debt notifications. Furthermore, I assumed borrowers remembered an accurate account of their experiences upon receiving the annual student loan debt notifications for the award years listed earlier.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study included undergraduate and graduate students who borrowed at least one federal subsidized or unsubsidized student loan during the 2018–2019, 2019–2020, and 2020–2021 award years. The award years were chosen to align with when Statute 1009.45 was enacted. Additionally, the participants' school status was either active, graduate, or drop from a university in Florida that was obligated to uphold the requirements of Statute 1009.45. Participants in doctoral degree programs were not considered to participate in this study because at that level of education, they could have a comprehensive understanding of their student loan portfolio and the terms and agreements of their loans.

Limitations

The first limitation of this study was derived from its qualitative design. As the researcher, I was the instrument that recorded, collected, and facilitated the research in this qualitative study. Collecting data required documenting all participants' personal opinions and experiences. As a result, the process was time-consuming and tedious, leading to possible gaps in collecting and evaluating data. The second limitation was my personal bias because of my 16 years of experience working in higher education's financial aid area. I address this bias in Chapter 3. The third limitation was that participants were borrowers with only subsidized or unsubsidized loans; the study was not generalized to other borrowers with other types of educational loans, such as Parent Plus Loans and private loans.

Significance

The contribution of this study is that it added to the literature. It could conceivably contribute to implementing, enforcing, or amending laws and policies for student loan debt and affordability by the State of Florida, higher education leaders, and other stakeholders. The results of this study are available for policymakers and practitioners in Florida to examine the credibility of Statute 1009.45. The findings could apply to current and future laws to bridge the gaps in assisting student loan borrowers in making informed financial decisions about their education. The results of this study can be used as persuasive data to conduct similar studies with a larger pool of participants, and the results can then be used to recommend implementing laws similar to Statute 1009.45 in other states or at the federal level.

Summary

This study was critical because of the financial impact of student loan debt on borrowers and the economy. As of 2020, 45 million Americans owe $1.5 trillion in student loans. For many college students, borrowing to pay for college is the only option to obtain a higher education. Throughout the United States, lawmakers are developing and implementing programs and regulations to help students understand the student loans they are borrowing. Although the programs and laws are positive initiatives, examining whether they are making a positive impact is vital. To inform policy lawmakers and higher education leaders in Florida, I conducted interviews with student loan borrowers from colleges and universities throughout Florida to learn how they make financial decisions about their education, with a focus on the influence of the annual student loan debt notification required by Statute 1009.45 and what additional supports would help them improve their decision-making**.**

As student loan debt increases, it is imperative to understand if the efforts being implemented are making a positive impact. Chapter 2 outlined and discussed the literature relevant to the problem this study addressed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Education beyond high school is essential for success in the 21st century, according to the U.S. Secretary of Education John B. King Jr. (as cited in U.S. Department of Education, 2016b). Despite the increasing importance of obtaining a higher education, there is a significant gap between the cost of college and students' ability to pay. Students in the United States with limited means to pay for college depend on federal student loan programs to fund their education. The outstanding student loan debt is currently $1.5 trillion owed by 45 million Americans, as mentioned in Chapter 1. According to the federal student aid portfolio summary report, the outstanding federal student loan amount has tripled since 2007 compared to 2020. (U.S. Department of Education, 2020a). Moreover, college affordability was a hot topic in the 2020 presidential election campaign. Adding to the problem of student loan debt and affordability is the lack of borrowers' financial ability to contribute to the economy by purchasing homes, cars, and even starting a family (Bowman, 2021).

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine how college students in the State of Florida make financial decisions about their education, with a focus on the influence of the annual student loan debt notifications and what additional supports would help them improve their decision-making**.** Research has shown that some students are unaware of the requirements and consequences of borrowing student loans (Hoffower, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Considering the increasing number of Americans borrowing student loans and the impact the debt has on the economy, measures must be applied to ensure the programs and laws implemented are making positive impacts. The lack of measures could increase the federal student loan debt and misuse time, effort, and resources executing ineffective fail-safe actions. In Chapter 2, I presented the literature search strategy, including the keywords and phrases used to search online portals, libraries, and databases. The study's conceptual frameworks are outlined, and a comprehensive literature review related to the fundamental concepts of this study is discussed.

Literature Search Strategies

This research was guided by one research question and three subquestions. The search engines used to gather information to answer the questions were Google Scholar and EBSCO Discovery Service. Both search engines gave insights and access to the following databases: Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Education Source, ProQuest Central, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, and Dissertations & Theses @ Walden University. These databases subsequently made available relevant resources for the study from different publications, such as news articles, academic journals, reports, books, studies, and approved dissertations.

The literature search continued with searching each database with the following keywords and phrases: *student loan debt, regulations for student loan debt and affordability,* and *Florida's regulations for student loan debt and affordability* with 2010 through 2021 as the years of specifications. Using the phrase *student loan debt,* both search engines produced thousands of articles; however, the historical articles were mainly used to examine the root causes of student loan debt and affordability, and the recent articles were used to examine the effects. *Regulations for student loan debt and* *affordability* produced no results, and *Florida's regulations for student loan debt and affordability* only produced results describing Statute 1009.45. Other keywords used in the literature search were *cost of college, student loan debt regulations, student loan debt,* and *student loans.* The search for *cost of college, student loan debt,* and *student loans* produced an abundant amount of scholarly articles; however, there was a limited number of articles on *student loan debt regulations*. A gap in the literature on regulating student loan debt was extensive due to the limited search results. Using Google Scholar, the search for *student loan debt regulations* resulted in an ample number of articles; however, the articles were mainly proposals and concerns about student loan debt, and using the EBSCO Discovery Service databases resulted in six articles that were mostly not suitable for this study.

Conceptual Framework

Two theories were used as this study's conceptual frameworks: the rational choice theory and the human capital theory. Both theories provided insights into what was important to students when making financial decisions about their education. The rational choice theory posits that outcomes are determined by choices individuals make in search of self-interest (Boudon, 2009). The human capital theory suggests that people's skills and knowledge correlate to their current and future outputs and income (Rosen, 1989).

Rational Choice Theory

Rational choice theory is generally used in economics to describe how people make choices. The rational choice concept is best known for choosing the most favorable decision with the greatest value that is most likely to deliver what is most wanted

(Cummins, 2012). The decision-making process using rational choice has two parts: determining the desired outcome's likelihood and deciding what it's worth to you (Dung & Thong, 2020). Under the rational choice theory, individuals evaluate possible alternatives and outcomes of their choices and then select the best option. According to Becker (1993), decisions are guided by evaluating each option's costs and benefits.

Research about rational choice in education reveals that students evaluate information such as the costs and benefits of different colleges and universities (Ovink, 2017). Moreover, students prefer the degree that holds the highest expected utility in their opinion, according to Breen and Goldthorpe (1997), and based on their preference, they create their educational goals (Zimmermann, 2020). In general, people decide on educational pathways that promise a high utility with the understanding of costs, benefits, and likelihood of success (Daniel & Watermann, 2018). An example of rational choice regarding higher education is an individual deciding what qualifies as a perfect school, evaluating the costs and benefits, identifying a list of schools that meet most criteria, and finally enrolling in the most affordable school.

Daniel and Watermann (2018) conducted a quasi-experimental test of rational choice theory. The study included 447 students with different social origins to investigate whether they use rational choice when intending to enroll in higher education. The factors were perceived benefits, perceived costs, and the probability of success. Daniel and Watermann's results indicated that individuals from all social origins intend to enroll in higher education if the perceived benefits and probability of success are high and the perceived costs are low; moreover, the results show that the participants' social origins do not influence their willingness to engage in higher education. Daniel and Watermann asserted that even though rational choice is relevant for students' enrollment plans, specific resources and interventions must support the students' evaluation of their rational choice factors. Some existing resources and interventions often only focus on some rational choice factors while neglecting others (Ehlert et al., 2017; Peter & Zambre, 2017).

Investing in higher education is generally considered a rational choice as it increases one's socioeconomic status. College students lacking the financial means for higher education costs typically borrow student loans with the understanding that their future returns will increase through advanced job opportunities. As stated in Chapter 1, understanding the rules and responsibilities of student loans can be difficult. Moreover, rational choice researchers differ in whether individuals completely understand the costs and potential benefits before making a rational choice (Wittek et al., 2013). For those reasons, if individuals borrow student loans using rational choice, resources and interventions regarding student loans should be presented thoroughly before they financially obligate themselves and possibly jeopardize their future goals. I used the rational choice theory in this study to guide the research question and subquestions about what student loan borrowers report as important when making financial decisions about their education.

Human Capital Theory

The human capital theory has functioned as a useful component to describe a range of economic phenomena related to educational decision-making (Paulsen & Smart, 2001). It is the accumulated knowledge and skills received by a person (Becker, 1962). According to the theory, individuals capitalize on their abilities by investing initially in the duration and type of education they want to obtain (Klevmarken & Quigley, 1976). Therefore, individuals' decision to invest in higher education is a form of human capital (Becker, 1993); moreover, the capability to increase lifetime earnings correlates with investing in higher education levels (Paulsen & Smart, 2001).

Torpey (2018) at the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics evaluated data about demographic and labor force characteristics and found that the United States median weekly earnings by educational attainment in 2017 indicated those with the highest education levels had incomes that were almost four times greater than those with a high school diploma. Torpey asserted that it is not easy to quantify the total value of an education; however, education makes sense in terms of dollars. Furthermore, the National Center for Education Statistics (2020) conducted a study and found that higher education attainment was associated with higher median earnings for individuals aged 25 to 34 who worked full time in 2018. The data revealed the median earnings for those with a master's or higher degree earned 19% higher than those with a bachelor's degree, and the median earnings for those with a bachelor's degree were 57% higher than those with a high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

The sheepskin effect is a phenomenon in applied economics that observes the positive correlation between individuals' earnings and completing academic degrees (Hungerford & Solon, 1987; Shabbir & Ashraf, 2011; Yunus, 2017). Moreover, previous human capital theory research showed positive relationships between borrowing student loans and increased income with degree completion (Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Gandhi, 2007; Henager, 2017). While human capital theory helps us understand the benefits of completing a higher education program, unforeseen issues such as obtaining gainful employment exist. Henager (2017) posited that a college degree has value; however, the problem is when students borrow beyond what they can repay, given their careers. Moreover, according to Henager, while compensation varies by profession, a college education's cost is generally the same across disciplines, potentially making it difficult for some to repay large amounts of student loans. The U.S. Financial Literacy and Education Commission (2019) stated that one in five adults who attended college believe their education cost surpassed the financial benefit. Even with human capital, borrowers who lack the understanding of their student loan debt requirements and responsibilities might also lack the knowledge to assess if their future job opportunities will be worth the debt they are acquiring.

In 2014, the Obama Administration implemented a law to prepare students for gainful employment in a recognized occupation (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). According to the U.S. Department of Education, the gainful employment rules forced schools to ensure the cost to complete a program does not leave borrowers with student loan payments greater than 20% of their discretionary income or greater than 8% of total earnings. The gainful employment regulations were intended to guarantee students do not borrow large amounts of debt for an education that leads to low-paying jobs; however, as of July 1, 2019, the Trump administration repealed the law (National Archives, 2019).

Therefore, students might be solely responsible for determining whether the programs they are enrolled in will result in gainful employment after completing college.

Literature Review Related to Key Factors

There are many reasons why college students borrow significant amounts of loans to pay for their education, even if they might not fully understand the terms and agreements of these types of loans. Key factors discussed in this section include the rising cost of college, understanding student loans, and the federal and states initiatives for student loan debt and affordability. Discussions also include students' financial impact post-college and the impact on the economy.

Rising Cost of College

According to the U.S. Financial Literacy and Education Commission (2019), the cost of a college education has been rising faster than income between 2005 and 2016, and prices for undergraduate degrees increased by 34% (Robinson, 2017). Robinson (2017) evaluated data between 1978 and 2017 from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau and found that the cost of higher education increased by 1,335%. Moreover, Robinson's results revealed that the higher education cost rate of growth exceeded medical costs, new home constructions, and the Consumer Price Index for all items. I discussed the revenue theory of cost, the free money theory, and the cost of attendance policy because they were related to the rising cost of college.

Higher Operational Cost Requires Higher Revenue

Economist Bowen (1980) posited that higher education's cost keeps increasing because the cost of operation at higher education institutions is based on aggregated funds raised instead of funds required for the relevant cost of operations. As a result, according to Bowen, institutions can regulate the amount of capital they wish to raise and dictate the cost of operation even if the costs do not directly apply to students' learning activities and the relevant cost of operation. Bowen asserted that if revenue increases, so will cost; moreover, the cost will increase because of revenue growth and not relevant operational expenses. Bowen declared that schools set tuition rates to meet their budgeted operating expenses. According to Kimball (2014), Bowen's work implies that revenue becomes a function of expenses instead of expenses being a function of revenue. Archibald and Feldman (2008) summarized Bowen's work by stating, "Given its revenue, the institution determines its costs." (p. 272). Bowen outlined a set of 'guidelines' relating to unit costs in colleges and universities:

1. The dominant goals of institutions are educational excellence, prestige, and influence.
2. In the quest for excellence, prestige, and influence, there is virtually no limit to the amount of money an institution could spend for seemingly fruitful educational ends.
3. Each institution raises all the money it can. No college or university ever admits to having enough money.
4. Each institution spends all it raises.
5. The cumulative effect of the preceding four laws is toward ever-increasing expenditure. The incentives inherent in the goals of excellence, prestige, and

> influence are not motivated by frugality or efficiency. (Bowen, 1980, pp. 19–20)

According to Bowen (1980), discussions continued with the influences of college prestige, recognition, and at times administrators' ambitions for institutional glory. Bowen asserted that colleges and universities dedicate increasing amounts of money to lesser essential purposes such as newer buildings, stadiums, excessive office equipment, etc., in the quest for institutional pride. Bowen posited that another contributing factor for increasing the cost of higher education is a direct result of competing for institutional fame.

Increasing the cost of operations to increase revenue is one reason the cost of education increases, leading to increases in tuition and fees and student loan borrowing. In this study, the focus was on students' financial decisions about their education, including the cost of tuition and fees; therefore, Bowen's work was used as supportive information.

Free Money vs. Increasing Tuition

Former Harvard University president Charles Eliot posited that excessive relevant costs are positive for schools; however, these costs should be paid with "free money." Originating from scholarships, grants, and donations instead of increasing tuition (Kimball 2014). The following is Eliot's summary of his approach to securing free money (as cited in Kimball, 2014).

> In the competition between American and foreign universities, the universities with the largest amount of money will inevitably win. How is more free money to

> be obtained? The only way to increase such funds is to emphasize the urgent need for them and then treat them with such steady consideration that they will have an assured permanence as funds. (1905-06, pp. 55, 57-58).

As other universities concerned themselves with reputation and prestige, Eliot's strategies triggered him to seek additional free money to multiply Harvard's financial wealth. Eliot's strategies consisted of the following areas (as cited by Kimball, 2014):

1. The emerging universities in the United States were competing for academic achievement and reputation, and their financial resources or wealth would determine the outcome of the competition.
2. A university's wealth should not come from permanently invested endowment funds.
3. A university must strive to keep its donated funds free of restrictions; thus, it can develop itself where it sees fit and not depend on tuition funds for expansion.
4. A university must be managed like a business, operating efficiently and disclosing its finances fully and clearly to the public for transparency and appreciation of management's decisions.
5. A university should regularly run a deficit and never carry a surplus to justify asking for additional free money.
6. Finally, the president must take full responsibility for expanding the university's wealth; this includes identifying, presenting, and justifying its need for more free money. Furthermore, competitions between universities

> should provide greater value to society because of their innovation and strive to be the first to meet new needs that will serve their communities.

Elliot outlined how colleges and universities should obtain free money for excessive relevant costs instead of increasing tuition and fees, which impacts student loan borrowing. Colleges and universities’ lack of free money is another reason for high tuition and fees. In this study the focus was on students’ financial decisions about their education, including the cost of tuition and fees; therefore, Elliot’s strategies were used as supportive information.

Cost of Attendance

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2017), the cost of attendance in higher education refers to all expenses associated with attending college in an academic year. The federal policy for cost of attendance allows higher education institutions to create budgets to identify all associated costs students will acquire during the year. The cost of attendance is different at each school; however, as described by the U.S. Department of Education, the cost of attendance includes but is not limited to tuition, housing, books, transportation, and loan fees. Institutions use the cost of attendance budgets to determine how much funding students are allowed to borrow from student loan programs.

Higher education institutions regulate all elements of the cost of attendance budgets and have enormous influences on the higher education financing system (Kelchen et al., 2014). The institutions determine the value of each cost associated with creating the cost of attendance budgets for their students; according to the U.S.

Department of Education (2016a), schools are not subject to regulations for their cost of attendance components and amounts. The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (2010) describes how each institution develops and regulates its cost of attendance by using a methodology that the institution also decides. Schools develop cost of attendance budgets to include tuition and fee increases, which inevitably impact student loan borrowing (Kelchen et al., 2017). Furthermore, some institutions may or may not include fees such as medical insurance in their cost of attendance budgets, leading to inflated cost of attendance at other institutions (McCarthy, 2015). Kelchen et al., 2017 conducted a study with data from 5,993 colleges and found significant inconsistencies with cost of attendance budgets. The factors that contributed to the variations in the budgets were associated with the colleges' locations and if the colleges were located in the suburbs, towns, rural areas, or large, medium, or small cities (Kelchen et al., 2017).

According to Heller (2013), the Bennett Hypothesis outlined another issue with the cost of attendance regulation where institutions can increase tuition and fees to offset the federal student loan limits, which results in schools increasing the value of their cost of attendance components because of students' access to guaranteed federal student loan funds. In 1987, William J. Bennett, the then-Secretary of Education, wrote an op-ed in the New York Times entitled, "Our Greedy Universities." Bennett (1987) described the relationship between federal student aid and the rising cost of tuition, which led to the creation of the Bennett Hypothesis. According to Bennett, increases in financial aid enabled colleges and universities to carelessly raise their tuition with the confidence that federal loans would cover the increase. If the U.S. Department of Education decides to raise the student loan limits, schools can follow and raise their expenses to capitalize on the new loan limits (Heller, 2013). Moreover, Robinson (2017) examined 25 empirical analyses of Bennett's hypothesis and found compelling evidence that the theory is valid, and most likely federal financial aid is a significant reason why the cost of college increases. Robinson described Bennett's theory by stating if a student has $100 to spend on education expenses, then the school will charge $100; however, if the student gain access to another $100 for education from financial aid, then the school will increase tuition to $200 to capture the total amount.

The lack of regulations for cost of attendance could be one of the reasons why the cost of college continues to increase throughout the years. According to Bennett's Hypothesis, schools increase their expenses to enlarge the cost of attendance budgets, which leads to raising tuition and fees and requiring students to borrow more significant amounts of student loans. The cost of attendance framework outlined another reason college costs increase, resulting in increased student loan debt. In this study the focus was on students' financial decisions about their education, including student borrowing loans; therefore, the cost of attendance framework was used as supportive information.

Understanding Student Loans

In pursuing higher education, many students feel obligated to sign a federal promissory note with terms and agreements they do not understand, even though the promissory note could lead to severe consequences for their long-term financial health (Webster et al., 2017). According to Meyer (2018), some students assumed the financial aid packages they received were free money and did not realize they had borrowed student loans. Furthermore, Kienzl (2019) conducted a study with 1200 college-bound high school students and found that most did not understand basic information about financial aid and student loans. According to Fernandez (2016), many student borrowers are uninformed regarding student loans, and they lack the knowledge and understanding of the annual cost of their education, their loan balances, the terms of repayments, and the consequences of defaulting on their loans. I discussed the federal entrance counseling for borrowing student loans and the availability of college support and resources because they were related to understanding student loans.

Federal Online Entrance Counseling for Borrowing Student Loan

The United States Government requires individuals borrowing federal student loans to complete online applications, forms, and other documents. One required document is an online entrance counseling, and the purpose of the document is to help borrowers understand the federal student loan programs and the responsibilities of borrowing federal student loans (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The entrance counseling includes information about loan repayments, the consequences of failing to repay loans, and how interest accrues. A borrower must complete the entrance counseling before a school accepts student loan disbursements on their behalf (U.S. Department of Education, 2019; Webster et al., 2017).

The online entrance counseling includes sections and subsections totaling approximately 26 pages of information for an individual to read, complete mock scenarios, and answer a combination of multiple-choice and true or false questions. If an answer is incorrect, other options can be chosen until the individual chooses the correct answer. Additionally, the entrance counseling has several hyperlinks with additional information, making the length of the counseling over 26 pages of information. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2019), the counseling process must be completed in a single session, and most people complete it in 23–30 minutes. Furthermore, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2018b), the PDF version of the entrance counseling guide is 39 pages.

Fernandez (2016) evaluated four studies regarding the effectiveness of the online entrance counseling and found significant flaws and opportunities for improvements. Some deficiencies identified by Fernandez were that the counseling was an extremely rigid online module as opposed to a customized in-person experience, the complexity and volume of information hindered the efficacy of the counseling, and the content was dense and complex, causing students to skim or skip the material. Even though the entrance counseling has numerous flaws, colleges continue to direct students to use the online tool mainly because it fulfills the U.S. Department of Education entrance counseling requirements and it’s free to the schools and students (Fernandez, 2016; Webster et al., 2017).

The federal entrance counseling process was created to be an informative tool to help individuals understand the terms and agreements when borrowing federal student loans; however, examining the various flaws in the process could provide insight into the borrowers’ levels of understanding of student loan debt. Due to the scope of this study, the information about the entrance counseling was only used as supportive data.

College Support and Intervention Systems

According to Kienzl (2019), many students do not have access to current and personalized financial aid information necessary to make informed financial decisions. By the mid-2000s, online counseling mostly replaced in-person counseling, leaving student borrowers to complete the process online instead of meeting a college officer face-to-face who would deliver personalized financial aid information and answer questions (Fernandez, 2016). Understanding student loans and debt are increasing issues for college students; therefore, schools should identify ways to provide support and resources.

According to Kienzl (2019), improving students' access to financial literacy should include schools increasing their resources to provide individualized counseling. Moreover, colleges should collaborate with high school counselors and nonprofit college access organizations to provide college-bound students and their families with thorough information about college costs and financial aid (Kienzl, 2019). Kerrigan (2020) described four ways schools could provide support to enhance students' understanding of student loans and debt. According to Kerrigan, schools should train counselors to effectively counsel students, implement financial aid workshops for new students, provide one-on-one loan counseling about loans and repayments for continuing students, and build individual relationships with students by assigning them a financial aid counselor. According to Kienzl, implementing support systems and resources to provide students with clear and concise explanations of financial aid is vital to equip students to manage their borrowing and repayment effectively. In this study I used the information about college support and interventions as supportive data.

Federal and States Laws for Student Loan Debt and Affordability

Policymakers at the federal and state levels recognized the need to enact laws to address the student loan debt and affordability crisis. The efforts are evident in the many attempts to implement federal regulations and the many programs implemented at the state and local levels. At the federal level, some Congress members proposed ideas such as debt-free college, tuition-free college, and free community college; however, these proposals remained proposals throughout the years. According to NASFAA (2020), a long list of student loans and repayment proposals were introduced in the House of Representatives yet never developed into laws. For instance, the H.R.6363 Student Debt Emergency Relief Act was introduced on March 23, 2020, to cancel at least $30,000 in outstanding federal student loan debt due to a national emergency; however, the proposals remained in the initial stages of the process (NASFAA, 2020).

Lawmakers' efforts also include inviting constituencies to address Congress regarding student loan debts. U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor invited student government leaders from the University of South Florida and the University of Tampa to Congress to discuss the student loan debt crisis for Floridians (U.S. Rep. Castor, 2017). According to U.S. Rep. Castor, many students in the Tampa Bay area are forced to borrow large student loans as the cost of college keeps increasing and subsidizes like the Pell Grant remains stagnant.

Policymakers at the state level have started to enact laws to address student loan debt and affordability throughout the United States (College Promise, 2019). Some states work directly with public universities and colleges to grant students free tuition for the first two years of college. Other local programs may include awarding private grants and scholarships to students with financial needs. According to College Promise, 24 states have enacted laws for free tuition at state and local colleges (Appendix B). The federal and state ideas, proposals, and programs are initiatives to reduce student loan borrowing; therefore, in this study I used the information as supportive data.

Impact of Borrowing Student Loans Post-College

College debt will be an unprecedented crisis for future generations in their finances and our nation's economy (Larkin, 2017; Robinson, 2017). Moreover, a contributing factor to the student loan crisis is that the cost of attending college has risen 42% for private schools and 19% for public schools between 2007 and 2017 (Larkin). After student borrowers graduate from college, millions of households will be obligated to repay student loan debt, resulting in reducing or eliminating their spending power for purchasing new cars, homes, and other consumer goods (Banerjee, 2021; Doran et al., 2016). Student loan debt will also impact post-college employment and other significant life choices, such as enrolling in graduate school or getting married (Kienzl, 2019). According to Lee et al. (2018), young debt holders are distressed mentally and emotionally by their student loan debts. Therefore, there is a great need to ensure students make informed decisions about borrowing student loans (One Wisconsin Institute, 2013).

Doran et al. (2016) surveyed a random sample of 1,283 graduate students about their student loan debt balances, sources of income, living situations, financial stresses, and the impact of student loan debt on their personal and professional lives. The results of Doran et al. study revealed that the borrowers owed significantly more than what they reported, they had substantial financial stresses, and many borrowers delayed major life milestones because of their student loan debt. Moreover, One Wisconsin Institute (2013) conducted a web survey consisting of 61,762 individuals and found that responders who borrowed student loans and had a bachelor's degree will have an estimated monthly payment of $499.00 and will take 19.7 years to pay off the loan, and for a graduate degree, the estimated monthly payment is $653.00 and will take 23 years to pay off. The One Wisconsin Institute found that a higher percentage of individuals currently repaying a student loan live with a family member compared to those who have already paid off their student loans. Moreover, the respondents with student loan debt were substantially more likely to purchase a used vehicle than a new vehicle compared to those without student loan debt (One Wisconsin Institute, 2013).

One Wisconsin Institute (2013) found that student loan debt significantly influences individuals' decisions about purchasing homes, cars, and goods and services. Mezza et al. (2017) posit that the financial obligations of student loan debts can negatively affect individuals' homeownership because of their debt-to-income ratio, credit scores, and lack of cash for down payments. Furthermore, many college students are unaware of the balances of the student loans they borrowed and the estimated monthly repayments after leaving school (Akers & Chingos, 2014).

The need to provide annual student loan debt notifications for student loans could be essential for students to make informed decisions about their educational finances and future spending; however, the information presented needs to be clear and comprehensive for students to understand. In this study I used the financial consequences for post-college students who borrowed student loans as supportive information.

Impact of Borrowing Student Loans on the Economy

Student loan debt is the second-largest household debt after mortgage; therefore, student loans are critical in American households' budgets. Furthermore, repayments for student loans begin six months after leaving school, when incomes tend to be comparatively low. According Mislinski (2021), student loan debt is approximately 29.8% of the total federal assets. There are ramifications for the economy when borrowers fail to repay their outstanding loans; according to Mitchell (2016), over 40% of student loan borrowers are not making payments and are delinquent on more than $200 billion. In 2017, the student loan delinquency rate stood at 11.2%, almost twice compared to 2003 (Larkin, 2017).

Younger borrowers in repayment status of their student loans tend to have credit limitations because of the newness of their credit record, entry-level job opportunities, and limited savings (Mezza et al., 2017). As a result, they tend to lower their overall consumption of goods and services (Bahadir & Gicheva, 2019). In some cases, Mezza et al. posit that borrowers with significant student loan debts postpone having a family, pass up the prospect of attending graduate school, or abstain from obtaining employment at lower-paying public interest jobs. According to Robinson (2017), many borrowers have postponed significant life events, including getting married, having children, and owning a home, regardless of their outstanding student loan balances. Student loan debt can be a substantial financial obligation for some borrowers, which then negatively impacts the economy. The information about the student loan debt's impact on the economy was used as supportive data in this study.

Summary

The literature review consisted of current and previous theories, studies, and articles about the cost of higher education, understanding student loans, and student borrowing behaviors. The challenges for student loan borrowers vary from the increasing cost of college, borrowing large amounts of student loan debt, not understanding the loan's rules and responsibilities, inability to repay student loans, and inability to fulfill personal goals such as getting married or purchasing a home. The literature confirmed that the outstanding student loan debt is 1.5 trillion as of 2020. It also confirmed that many college students lack the necessary information about the loans they borrowed. Lawmakers at the federal and state levels have responded to these challenges by proposing regulations for student loans and affordability; however, many proposals presented in Congress and local legislative bodies remain as such. Some private organizations also share efforts to mitigate student loan debt for individuals by creating programs for free college for the first two years and creating scholarship programs for low-income individuals. The literature revealed that student loan debt is at a record high, deterring borrowers from starting families and purchasing new cars, homes, and other consumer goods. These borrowers' lack of purchasing power reduces overall consumption and contributes to economic stagnation.

The literature review confirmed a need to support student loan borrowers to avoid taking on debt beyond their potential purchasing power. The literature also demonstrated that borrowers' decisions could be influenced by rational choice or investing in human capital and that colleges and universities need to implement support systems and interventions to help students understand all the factors that led to their choices. Furthermore, the literature review described how higher education institutions should evaluate the key factors causing students' costs to increase and identify ways to reduce those costs. The literature explained how the federal government could mitigate part of the student loan debt crisis by regulating the current policy for the cost of attendance. Student loan debt is deemed a financial burden for millions of borrowers; therefore, it was necessary to understand what factors are important when individuals make financial decisions about their education.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine how college students in the State of Florida make financial decisions about their education, with a focus on the influence of the annual student loan debt notifications and what additional supports would help them improve their decision-making**.** Some states have proposed or implemented laws for college students to access their student loan account information; however, understanding the loan data might be complex.

Chapter 3 presents the research design and rationale, the methodology, and the roles of the researcher. This chapter also includes the instruments used, the data collection process, and the data analysis plan. Finally, the chapter outlines trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and possible ethical issues.

Research Design and Rationale

In this section of Chapter 3, the research question is restated. The research design and rationale for using a basic qualitative approach are discussed, and the roles of the researcher are outlined.

Research Question

The research question and the subquestions in this study were the following:

- RQ: What do student loan borrowers report as being important when they make financial decisions about their education?
- SQ1: How did students use the information they gleaned from the annual student loan debt notification?

- SQ2: How did the information change their view/behavior with respect to their education?
- SQ3: What additional support would help students make sound financial decisions related to their education?

Research Design

The structure of this basic study followed a qualitative approach to attempt to understand the participants' experiences and decision-making processes after receiving and reviewing the annual student loan debt notification. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), qualitative research depends on the methodological quest to see how individuals experience the world and make importance of their encounters. Qualitative research generates rich, contextual, and generally unstructured data (Mason, 2002) by engaging in dialogues with the research participants in a natural setting (Creswell, 2009). Moreover, Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) stated that qualitative research could generate knowledge to solve problems and create policies. Quantitative and mixed-method research were not suited for this study because I sought to discover the students' understanding and perception of what was important when they make financial decisions about their education.

The basic qualitative research approach is primarily used in education, and data are collected through interviewing, observing, or analyzing documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interview questions (see Appendix C) reflected the research question, three subquestions, and the conceptual frameworks by interviewing the participants with open-ended questions suited for discussing opinions and experiences. The data collected were sourced from interviewing individuals; therefore, a basic qualitative approach was appropriate for this study.

According to Schwandt (2015), in a narrative research inquiry, a researcher investigates a phenomenon by analyzing participants' stories of their life experiences. A qualitative narrative approach was considered for this study to evaluate the long-term consequences of owing student loans during and after college; however, a basic approach was more appropriate for the research due to the scope of this study.

The phenomenological research approach was also considered for this study since the method focuses on the participants' descriptions of their lived experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). However, phenomenological research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher studies the participants extensively for prolonged periods to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). Even though the participants in this study discussed their opinions and experiences, there was no need to study them extensively for a lengthy time frame; therefore, the phenomenology approach was not appropriate for this study.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative studies, the researcher's role is to be the instrument that records, collects, and facilitates the research (Creswell, 2012). In this study, I served as the researcher to collect, record, interpret and analyze data. The process was engaging and comfortable for the participants, and information about the interview procedure was presented thoroughly. Open-ended questions were used, and I remained neutral with comments and body language. Furthermore, my role included explaining the background of Statute 1009.45, identifying social media platforms, and identifying conferencing call tools appropriate to accommodate the participants. My role also included obtaining the required approval letters and discussing and obtaining permission from the participants. Lastly, my role addressed possible ethical issues, maintained a good relationship with the participants, was a good listener, and I interpreted the data correctly.

Qualitative researchers face several ethical challenges in all stages of a study (Sanjari et al., 2014). My role as the researcher could have posed ethical challenges and personal bias because of my extensive work history in higher education. I have worked in higher education in the financial aid area for over 16 years, and I have developed a wide range of knowledge and understanding of how the federal student aid program works. Additionally, my work experience includes over a decade of working in executive-level positions at various colleges and universities, where I was responsible for overseeing the financial aid operations for multiple campuses. As a result, my extensive knowledge of the U.S. Department of Education rules and regulations, my long work experience in higher education, and my history of working directly with students, their parents, and employees at the corporate and campus level could have led to a risk of personal bias. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), deficit orientation refers to when researchers consider people from various groups lacking certain knowledge, skills, or value which can devalue or degrade the participants' input and responses. I neutralized deficit orientation by reminding myself that the participants' opinions and experiences were valuable to the research and must be respected. I managed my personal biases by interviewing students I had never worked with and documenting my feelings and views throughout the process. Furthermore, while observing the participants, engaging in the interviews, and reading through the data, I followed the process of bracketing to create visual means to highlight personal reactions to the data in real-time (Ravitch & Carl).

Methodology

This study had a basic qualitative approach, with the aim to examine how college students in the State of Florida make financial decisions about their education, with a focus on the influence of the annual student loan debt notification required by Statute 1009.45 and what additional supports would help them improve their decision-making**.** The following subsections describe information concerning the methodology of the participation selection, the instrumentation, the data collection process, and the data analysis plan, after which I outline the ethical procedures and issues of trustworthiness.

Participation Selection

The population for this study consisted of college students who borrowed federal student loans while attending a college or university in Florida that is obligated to uphold the requirements of Statute 1009.45. The participating group consisted of 10 student loan borrowers who met a list of criteria. The criteria were that participants were 18 years of age or older, who attend or attended a college or university in Florida as an undergraduate or graduate student, and who borrowed federal student loans during one or all of the following award years: 2018–2019, 2019–2020, and 2020–2021. Additionally, the participants were asked to present at least one of their annual student loan debt notifications; however, the participants who could not locate their notifications were provided with the sample notification displayed in Appendix A. The sample notification is a copy of an annual student loan debt notification distributed by a large state university in Florida, and all sensitive information was removed or redacted. The award years were chosen in consideration of when Statute 1009.45 was enacted in Florida.

The participant sample size of 10 individuals was sufficient to attain data saturation; however, the size could have been adjusted if needed. In qualitative research, there are no set rules for having a certain number of participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The participants were purposefully selected during the recruiting process for the study. The recruiting process was initiated through online social media platforms and group posts. The groups included individuals who attend or attended a university in Florida. Social media groups allowed individuals to share their common interests and express their opinions; therefore, social media group posts were the primary method of recruiting participants for this study.

Snowball sampling was also used for enlisting participants. Snowball sampling is a recruitment technique in which the researcher asks the participants who provided relevant and information-rich data to recommend other potential subjects (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Purposefully choosing participants provides context-rich and thorough accounts of specific populations, according to Ravitch and Carl (2016); therefore, recruiting participants using tools to target specific individuals was crucial because the participants needed to meet the criteria listed previously. Facebook was the social media platform used; therefore, a partner site was not required. Walden University's approval was required to conduct the study, and permission from the Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the approval number 04-11-22-0557230 were obtained.

Instrumentation

The value of interviewing participants and collecting data allows researchers to go beyond the research questions and explore the content on a deeper level (Creswell, 2012). The interview protocol and questions (see Appendix C) contained open-ended questions to establish sufficient data to answer the research question and subquestions. I completed the interviews via individual videoconference calls through Zoom (https://zoom.us). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and participants residing in different parts of Florida, in-person interviews were excluded. The questions were clear and comprehensive for participants with or without an understanding of financial aid and borrowing student loans to ensure genuine responses. Furthermore, the questions were broad and required the participants to elaborate on their views and opinions; therefore, their answers facilitated collecting rich data for this study. I recorded the interviews for audio responses using the Zoom videoconference tool, and I used Otter.ai (https://otter.ai) to transcribed the files.

Data Collection

The data collecting process commenced when the consent forms were received from the participants. All participants were given copies of their signed consent forms and an interview protocol document. Upon receiving the consent forms, I scheduled a Zoom videoconference call for each participant, and the calls were the primary source of data collection. Each participant was interviewed for approximately 1 hour. Time was monitored to ensure the interviews were completed within the timeframe; however, each participant was granted an additional 30 minutes if they needed to elaborate on their responses. At the end of the interview, a $20 thank-you gift card was sent to eight participants for their time. Two participants declined the gift cards. All participants were given the option to withdraw from the study if requested.

At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the consent form with the participant to ensure they thoroughly understood their rights and privacy. The interviews were audio recorded using Zoom videoconferencing, and the files were transcribed using Otter.ai. Handwritten notes were taken to document my thoughts and observations during the interview sessions. A copy of each transcript summary was shared with the respective participant to review, edit, and add content to ensure accuracy and completeness. The participants also participated in member checking to ensure that my interpretation and analysis of their responses were accurate. According to Motulsky (2021), member checking is a common strategy in qualitative research to increase validity and credibility by soliciting feedback from the participants about the data collected or the interpretation of the data. Maxwell (2013) described member checking as an essential process of removing any possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of the participants' perspectives and contributions and identifying biases and misunderstandings during observation. Participants were informed that there would be a follow-up call to resolve any conflicting information if needed after the review process. Participant validation is valuable to inform data analysis, reflections, and critique of codes (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Data Analysis Plan

Qualitative data analysis is a deliberate, systematic, and structured undertaking of interpreting and describing the data to reflect the study's process and insights (Ravitch &

Carl, 2016). I began the data analysis and interpretations by organizing the transcripts, handwritten notes, and recordings. I read the transcripts thoroughly and hand-coded the data to form categories, subcategories, and themes. I interpreted the meaning of the categories and themes to address the research question and subquestions. According to Creswell (2009), a qualitative inquiry takes on different philosophical analyses and interpretations and involves the following steps:

- Organize and prepare the data for analysis by transcribing the interviews, visually scanning materials, typing handwritten notes, and sorting the data.
- Read all data meticulously to get a general idea of what the participants are conveying.
- Start the coding process by organizing the material into segments.
- Use the coding process to interrelate categories, subcategories, and themes for analysis.
- Identify how the categories, subcategories, and themes will be represented and grounded by the theory and qualitative narrative.
- Interpret or make meaning of the data.

Creswell's steps for analyzing and interpreting the data were used to guide this study to ensure the data analysis plan was deliberate, systematic, and structured. The participants were informed that there would be a follow-up call to discuss and resolve discrepancies connected to the research question and subquestions.

Along with using Creswell's steps listed above, I collected and analyzed the data simultaneously. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative research analysis begins with the first participant, the first note, the first documentation, and the first observation to identify emerging insights, hunches, and tentative hypotheses. The first step of the data analysis for this study included organizing and preparing the data from the first interview, documents, and notes to gain insights and ideas for the subsequent interviews and phases for collecting data. I coded the data using phrases and single words to ensure information was not overlooked weeks later. I documented my thoughts, hunches, and observations after each interview. Additionally, I created an inventory of all data using manual methods, transcripts, and spreadsheets. Categories, subcategories, and themes were identified when coded data were recurring and included the conceptual frameworks used in the study.

Issues of Trustworthiness

In general, qualitative research trustworthiness is often questioned because of how validity and reliability are addressed compared to other types of research (Shenton, 2004). Ravitch and Carl (2016) described trustworthiness as an intricate and systematic process of implementing and assessing a study’s accuracy. I established trustworthiness in this study by implementing plans for validity and reliability by documenting all protocols and developments. Furthermore, validity and reliability were implemented in all phases of the study: research design, data collection, analysis, and documentation of the findings. The following is a list of some of Gibbs’s (as cited in Ravitch & Carl, 2016) suggested procedures to ensure reliability:

- Check transcripts for errors.
- Make sure the definition of codes and the process of coding are aligned.

- Use participant’s checking.
- Use rich and thick descriptions.
- Clarify any bias the researcher might bring to the study.
- Present negative or discrepant information.

Gibbs’s suggested procedures for ensuring reliability were utilized as a guide for this study; for instance, the transcripts were inspected for errors, and rich, thick descriptions were documented to ethically produce valid and reliable results.

Credibility

Guba (as cited in Ravitch & Carl, 2016) described credibility as the researcher’s ability to think through all the complexities that develop in a study and deal with unexplained patterns and themes. Furthermore, according to Toma (as cited in Ravitch & Carl, 2016), setting up credibility in qualitative research incorporates triangulation, participant approval, thick descriptions, discussing negative cases, long commitments in the field, and utilizing peer de-briefings, and an external auditor.

Credibility for this study was established by including 10 participants. The written documentation consisted of quotes from all participants in a narrative approach. Triangulation was used to compare and cross-check the data from the Zoom videoconference interview transcripts, the participants’ annual student loan debt notification if it was provided, and the researcher’s journals. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), triangulations using multiple data sources allow the researcher to compare and cross-check data collected from observations, interviews, or follow-ups.

Additionally, the participants were involved in the transcript summary review and member checking to ensure accuracy, completeness, and credibility.

Transferability

According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), transferability can apply or transfer to qualitative studies in broader contexts while preserving their context-specific richness. In this study, thick descriptions of the data from the data collection process, the interview setting, and the interview questions (see Appendix C) were included to allow the readers to compare and transfer features of the design and the related results in future research. The design or findings from this study could be transferred to future research involving evaluating the effectiveness of some programs or similar laws regarding student loan debt and affordability. Moreover, the findings from this study could be transferred to future research on the efficacy of institutions counseling students about student loans. Including thick descriptions in studies enables other researchers to transfer aspects of the research to newer studies instead of replicating the design and findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Dependability

Dependability is described as having a reasoned argument for how data is collected, that the data is consistent with the argument, and that the data answers the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The procedures outlined in the data collection and the data analysis plan earlier in this chapter ensured proper processes for transcribing and coding data and consistency in collecting and organizing data to answer the research question and subquestions.

Confirmability

A goal of confirmability is to acknowledge and explore how personal biases and prejudices influence the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Moreover, Ravitch and Carl state that researcher positionality and bias are essential aspects of qualitative research that must be scrutinized, and the researcher must challenge systematic and ongoing ways throughout all stages of the study. Ensuring that positionality issues do not influence the research process and the findings, it is crucial to know yourself as part of the preparation process, learn how to manage personal biases, and implement steps to safeguard the study. All stages of this study were documented, and I kept a journal of any biased thoughts for reflection.

Ethical Procedures

Engaging in ethical practices in research projects and anticipating ethical issues are essential (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this study, the initial proper procedures were to obtain Walden University's approval and the participants' consent to conduct the interviews, gather their data, and use it for analysis and presentations. All participants signed a consent form before engaging in the research process. The consent form was a guide to preserve integrity, respect privacy, and adhere to the fundamental values of ethics in research. The form included information such as the researcher's credentials and identification, a description of the participant selection process, the purpose of the study, the level and the type of participant's involvement, a guarantee of confidentiality to the participant, and that the participants can withdraw at any time.

All data collected for this study are kept in a secured file cabinet in my home office for five years and will be destroyed after that period. Furthermore, the electronic data are stored on multiple flash drives with password protection and will be deleted after five years. The participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality during the data collection process, the data analysis, and the presentations of the findings. All interviews were audio recorded securely via Zoom videoconference calls.

Summary

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was restated at the beginning of this chapter. The goal was to examine how college students in the State of Florida make financial decisions about their education, with a focus on the influence of the annual student loan debt notifications and what additional supports would help them improve their decision-making**.** The qualitative narrative and phenomenological research approaches were considered to design this study; however, they were not used for reasons described earlier in the research design section.

I served as the researcher to collect, record, interpret, analyze data, and address possible ethical issues. This chapter described how the participants were selected and how the data were collected and analyzed. The final section of this chapter included measures for trustworthiness, ethical practices, the participants' privacy rights, and data security.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine how college students in the State of Florida make financial decisions about their education, with a focus on the influence of the annual student loan debt notifications and what additional supports would help them improve their decision-making**.** I interviewed 10 current and past undergraduate and graduate students who borrowed federal student loans between 2018 and 2021 at a college in the State of Florida.

The following research question and subquestions guided this study:

- RQ: What do student loan borrowers report as being important when they make financial decisions about their education?
- SQ1: How did students use the information they gleaned from the annual student loan debt notification?
- SQ2: How did the information change their view/behavior with respect to their education?
- SQ3: What additional support would help students make sound financial decisions related to their education?

In this chapter, I describe the setting, the participant demographics, the data collection procedure, and the data analysis process. I discuss evidence of trustworthiness, and I then present the results.

Settings

This study was conducted in a virtual setting due to COVID-19 restrictions. Participants were recruited through Facebook groups and snowball sampling. Each interview was completed in one sitting, and the participants chose the interview date and time. The interviews were conducted in my private home office using Zoom to audio record each session. The Zoom audio files were uploaded to the Otter.ai system, and the recordings were transcribed from speech to text.

Demographics of Participants

The 10 participants in this study were either current or former undergraduate or graduate students who borrowed federal student loans between 2018 and 2021 at a college in the State of Florida. Four participants were current students in bachelor's degree programs, four graduated with bachelor's degrees and were not advancing their education at this time, one was a current student in a master's program, and one graduated with a master's degree. Five participants were female, five were male, and all were over the age of 18. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to maintain confidentiality: Flora, Keith, Allison, Ken, Kevin, AJ, Cindy, Anthony, Lyn, and Rachel. Table 1 displays the participants' pseudonyms, school status, and academic level.

Table 1

Participants' Demographics

Participant's pseudonym	School status	Academic level
Flora	Active - BA	3rd-year undergrad
Cindy	Active - BA	3rd-year undergrad
Anthony	Active - BA	3rd-year undergrad
Lyn	Active - BA	3rd-year undergrad
Keith	Graduated - AA and BA	Graduated undergrad
Allison	Graduated - BA	Graduated undergrad
Ken	Graduated - BA	Graduated undergrad
AJ	Graduated - BA	Graduated undergrad
Kevin	Active - MBA	2nd year grad school
Rachel	Graduated - MBA	Graduated grad school

Data Collection

After obtaining Walden University's IRB approval, I began recruiting participants through Facebook groups. I posted an invitation flyer to seven groups multiple times, which generated five participants. The other five participants were recruited through snowball sampling. The 10 participants sent an email with their interest in participating. I responded by sending the consent form and the sample annual student loan debt notification (see Appendix C). Before I began collecting the data, each participant submitted their signed consent form via email. Recruiting and interviewing the 10 participants took approximately 6 weeks, and that number of participants was sufficient to reach data saturation.

The interviews were conducted privately to protect the participants' privacy and conversations. The first interview was scheduled for 90 minutes; the first 60 minutes were slated for the interview, and the remaining 30 minutes were slated for additional comments from the participant. However, after the first interview, I decided only 60 minutes would be sufficient for the remaining interviews. The average time of the interviews was 38 minutes; the longest was 51 minutes, and the shortest was 26 minutes.

The interviews consisted of 10 questions, and each question included one or two probes (see Appendix C). The 10 participants answered all the questions and probes, and the majority of responses were thorough. Prior to each interview, I introduced myself, reiterated the purpose of the study, and asked the participants if they had their annual student loan debt notifications. Two out of the 10 participants used their annual student loan debt notifications to answer the interview questions, and the remaining eight used the sample notification displayed in Appendix C. There were various reasons why eight participants used the sample notification; the reasons are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Participants' Reasons for Using the Sample Student Loan Debt Notification

Participants	Used sample	Comments about using notification
Anthony	No	Used his notification
Rachel	No	Used her notification
Keith	Yes	Did not have notifications; vaguely recall reviewing them
Flora	Yes	Did not have notifications; recalled receiving them
Allison	Yes	Did not have notifications; recalled receiving them
Ken	Yes	Did not have notifications; did not receive them
Kevin	Yes	Did not have notifications; did not receive them
AJ	Yes	Did not have notifications; cannot recall receiving them
Cindy	Yes	Did not have notifications; cannot recall receiving them
Lyn	Yes	Did not have notifications; cannot recall receiving them

After the Otter.ai system transcribed the Zoom audio recordings from speech to text, I reviewed each transcript numerous times and corrected all text that did not correspond with the audio recordings. Each participant was sent an email with a transcript summary and my analysis of their interview. The email also requested that the participants review the information for accuracy and completeness and include edits and additional comments if needed. All participants responded positively to accuracy and completeness and had no change requests for the transcript summaries or my analysis. However, one participant wanted to add a comment about his father's financial contribution.

Data Analysis

The transcript summaries and analysis created for member checking before coding allowed me to gauge potential categories. While summarizing each transcript, I noticed similar phrases and comments (e.g., "borrowing student loans was the only option", "the cost of college was expensive", and "I needed a financial aid advisor's help"). A list of all the participants' similar phrases and comments was created using the transcript summaries, which were then grouped into potential categories.

Each transcript was hand-coded using descriptive coding in Microsoft Word. A Word document was created for each participant, which included a table with two columns. The first column had the participant's transcript, and the second column had my descriptive coding. I looked for common phrases, descriptions, comments, and experiences to create categories and subcategories. Three cycles of coding for each transcript were completed to ensure no additional codes emerged. The coding process created the following categories: borrowing student loans, communication, cost, guidance, helpful, jobs, comprehension level, loans, personal growth, support, and switch schools. I then organized and aligned the categories and sub-categories accordingly to inform the research question and the three subquestions.

Once the categories and subcategories were organized to answer the research question and subquestions, I developed 14 themes. Five themes were formed with the RQ:

- access to student loans
- financial cost for a college education

- growth and development
- financial aid advising
- parents' support

There were four themes for SQ1:

- usefulness of the annual student loan debt notification
- understanding the annual student loan debt notification
- reducing cost and debt
- adjusting non-curricula activities

There were three themes for SQ2:

- unexpected loan balances
- other funding options
- college is expensive

Finally, for SQ3, there were two themes:

- support from a financial aid advisor
- preferred delivery method of communication

Table 3 demonstrates how themes were identified from categories.

Table 3

Example of Identifying Themes From Categories

Participant	Excerpt from transcripts	Code	Category	Subcategory	Theme
Allison	I started by realizing how expensive college was in terms of the classes	Expensive		Realized college was expensive	
Rachel	I knew it would be cheaper than moving out of state to go to school	In state is cheaper	Cost	Knew out of state schools are more expensive	Financial cost of a college education
Flora	I left school because it was too expensive, now I'm going to a different school that cost less	Expensive		Left school because it was too expensive	
AJ	I can't go back to school especially paying master's price	Paying master's price		Cannot go to graduate school because of price	

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the data was demonstrated through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability throughout this study. The following subsections describe how processes were used to ensure validity and trustworthiness while collecting and analyzing the data. The methods are described in Chapter 3.

Credibility

The credibility of the data was established using multiple methods. First, I initially planned to interview 12 to 15 participants; however, after interviewing 10 participants, data saturation was met. Second, I triangulated the data using the interview transcripts, field notes for each participant, journals I created after each interview, and the notifications submitted by participants. Finally, all participants were involved in transcript checking and member checking. Each participant reviewed their interview transcript summary and my analysis of their responses to verify accuracy and completeness. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), credibility can be established by implementing triangulations and member checking strategies.

Transferability

Transferability was made available by including thick descriptions of the data and procedures so readers could compare and transfer aspects of the design and results to future studies (Ravitch & Carl 2016). I described the setting and how the interviews were conducted using web-based tools to record and transcribe the data. I recruited participants from different academic levels and school statuses, as outlined in Table 2. I also described how the transcripts were coded in Microsoft Word using descriptive coding and how I identified the categories, subcategories, and emerging themes to inform the research question and subquestions.

Dependability

Dependability was achieved by following the procedures outlined in the data collection section and the data analysis plan in Chapter 3. All data were examined multiple times, and the research question and subquestions were answered. Furthermore, the data were organized and securely stored for easy access for audit purposes or future studies. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), dependability entails having a solid justification for how you collected the data, the data is consistent with your justification, and the justified methods are appropriate to answer the research questions.

Confirmability

Confirmability was established by exploring and acknowledging my personal biases and prejudices throughout the study. I used reflexivity to recognize and document my biases by journaling throughout the data collection and analysis phases. Furthermore, the interview transcripts and descriptive codes were scrutinized for positionality and biases so that I do not influence the research processes or the findings. My biases included my extensive knowledge about financial aid and student loans and my long history of working directly with college students. I implemented steps to safeguard the study by managing my talking points with the participants using only information about the study and the interview questions.

Additionally, all participants were students whom I had never met or helped. I also included member checking in the data collection processes so that the participants could review their responses for accuracy and completeness. Lastly, during the data analysis phase, I used the participants' own words to develop the categories and subcategories to identify emerging themes.

Results of Study

The results of this study are described in this section by categories, subcategories, and emerging themes. The subcategories were illustrated using the participants' words from the interview transcripts. I identified 14 categories, and 14 themes emerged. Five themes were associated with the main research question, four with Subquestion 1, three with Subquestion 2, and two with Subquestion 3 (see Table 4).

Table 4

Categories and Themes That Addressed the Research Question

Question	Category	Themes
RQ		
1	Loans	Access to student loans
2	Cost	Financial cost of a college education
3	Personal growth	Growth and development
4	Guidance	Financial aid advising
5	Support	Parents' support
SQ1		
1	Helpful	Usefulness of the annual student loan debt notification
2	Comprehension level	Understanding the annual student loan debt notification
3	Switch school	Reducing cost and debt
4	Jobs	Adjusting non-curricula activities
SQ2		
1	Borrowing student loans	Unexpected loan balances
2	Funding options	Other funding options
3	Cost	College is expensive
SQ3		
1	Support	Support from a financial aid advisor
2	Communication	Preferred delivery method of communication

Research Question

The RQ was as follows: What do student loan borrowers report as being important when they make financial decisions about their education? The five themes connected to the RQ were: Access to Student Loans, Financial Cost of a College Education, Growth & Development, Financial Aid Advising, and Parents' Support.

Access to Student Loans

Nine participants described how borrowing student loans were their only remaining option to pay for their education. They illustrated through their experiences how access to borrowing student loans were important when making financial decisions about their education. Flora said,

> I had to borrow student loans because my family did not have the money to send me to school, and there was no other way to afford it. I had some scholarship money, but it was not enough to attend school. They told me if I did not have the money before school started, I would not be able to attend classes. So, the only option for us was to take out a loan.

AJ described how it was changeling for him to attend college full-time and hold a job; as a result, he needed to borrow student loans to pay for his education. AJ said, “I borrowed student loans because I needed to pay for my classes. I was a student full-time, and I found it difficult to work, so I decided to pay for my classes using loans mostly.” Rachell said, “I knew I would not have been able to pay out of pocket. So, I needed the loans.”

Keith described how he paid out of pocket for his education at the state college where he obtained an associate degree. However, when Keith enrolled at a state university to continue his education, he had to borrow student loans to pay his tuition and fees. Keith said,

> I did not take out loans at my state college because I paid my way. Going to state university was more expensive, and I had to take out loans there. While I was at

> the state university, I also worked part-time at different points. I had two jobs and a part-time gig … because I could not afford university otherwise.

Kevin described how he had to borrow student loans because it was his only option to help him pay for college, even though his mother was a single parent with a teacher's income. Kevin said,

> The cost of going to school is really high. I had to bite the bullet and get student loans. I tried to apply with the FAFSA to get free federal student aid, but I did not qualify, even though my mom was single and had a teacher's salary. I did not qualify ... I could not get any funding any other way.

Allison explained how she did not have enough money to pay out of pocket to cover the cost of her tuition and fees. As a result, she had to borrow student loans to attend college. Allison said, "The amount I needed to complete my degree and the amount that I had, as far as money goes, I did not have that amount to pay." Ken said, "It was an expensive school, so I took out loans to afford the tuition … even if I had gone to community college, I would have had to take out loans." Anthony said, "I borrowed student loans because my mom could not afford to pay my whole tuition as a single mom." Cindy described why she needed to borrow student loans. Cindy said, "I did not have enough money to help me throughout college financially."

Financial Cost for a College Education

Eight out of 10 participants conveyed experiences that illustrated that the cost of their college was important when making financial decisions about their education. For instance, AJ completed a bachelor's degree program and hoped to complete a master's degree in the future. AJ postponed continuing his education because of the financial cost. AJ said,

> Part of me wants to return to school to get a master's in business or architecture, but I also understand how much it cost to go now. I want to be more financially stable before I decide to return. I also think the price is fair for education in my field. Based on that, I do not think the price is too high. Still, I understand the actual price, and I know that I cannot go back to school especially paying for a master's degree. When I am more financially set, I will not have to take out more loans; I can pay out of pocket and continue to repay my loans.

Keith received an associate degree from a state college. He then transferred to a state university and completed a bachelor's degree program. Prior to enrolling in the state college, the cost was a factor in Keith's decision. Keith said, "I started at a state college because I was not sure if I even wanted to go, but I figured it would be a good way to find out if to start classes at a state college, and it would be a lot cheaper."

Rachel completed a master's degree. After comparing costs with in-state and out-of-state universities, Rachael decided to enroll in an in-state university to minimize her cost. Rachel said, "It was very expensive. I chose to stay in-state because I was born and raised in Florida, and I knew it would be cheaper than moving out of state to go to school."

Allison completed a bachelor's degree program, and even though she did not live on campus, she realized college fees were still expensive. Allison looked for assistance with scholarships and other funding to afford the cost. Allison said,

> I started by realizing how expensive college was in terms of the classes. Even though I was not staying on campus and I was only paying for the classes and books, it was still expensive. I started speaking to financial advisors at my school about how to get involved in getting scholarships.

Cindy is currently a junior in an undergraduate program at a private college. She saw the cost of her tuition and fees for the semester and wanted to switch to a community college so it would be more affordable for her and her mother. Cindy said,

> I did not want to have a big amount of money on my mom's shoulders … At first, I did not want to go when they sent me the email. I said mom, do not worry about it. I will try to go to community colleges, and she said no, you worked this far already. Also, my mom said I have my aunt to help us with financial aid and the FAFSA.

Flora is currently a junior in an undergraduate program, and during her first and second years, she attended a private college. When Flora enrolled in the private college, she felt that it was too expensive, but her parents took out loans so she could start school. However, after Flora's sophomore year, she realized how much student loan she had borrowed and decided to transfer to a more affordable school. Flora stated,

> I appreciate my parents for taking out the loan to allow me to start school, but I feel like we took out a lot of money, and the interest rate just was not the best deal ... I left school because it was too expensive and now I am going to a different school that cost less.

Ken has a bachelor's degree from a private college. After realizing how much it cost for his education at the private college, Ken felt that he should have stayed in a community college because of the lower cost. Ken said, "I would have just stuck with community college instead of being with KVX College," a pseudonym.

Anthony is currently a junior in an undergraduate program at a private college, and because of the cost, he wanted to transfer to a community college. However, Anthony did not change college because he thought his academic credits would not transfer and felt stuck at the private college. Anthony stated,

> When I tried to transfer to a community college, I figured I could not because it would be a public community college. For my credits to transfer, the school has to be a private college. I guess all my credits would not transfer and I was just stuck ... my roommate dropped out of college because he could not handle the amount he was paying.

Growth and Development

Four out of 10 participants expressed how growth and development were important when making financial decisions about their education. Keith explained how he felt that more education would lead to more opportunities. Keith said, "I realized that I enjoyed becoming more educated and decided to continue. I wanted to go to a university where I felt I would get a better education and potentially more opportunities for growth." Flora said, "Balancing school and work were very difficult, so I quit the job … I think it was an investment in myself." AJ said, "I knew my ultimate goal at that point in my life was to graduate." Kevin did not want to depend on anyone for financial help; he said, "I wanted to be able to pay for classes myself."

Financial Aid Advising

Four participants described how financial aid advising was helpful when making financial decisions about their education. Flora explained how she needed assistance understanding how student loans work, and she described her experience when she received assistance when applying for scholarships. Flora said, "I was very confused at the beginning, and so were my parents we did not understand how the loans worked and what was going to happen. We needed someone to explain it and help us out." Flora said, "I got help from the financial aid department, and my advisor sent me emails with scholarships to apply for; that helped a lot."

Keith shared how he spoke to a financial aid advisor about the financial cost of taking additional credits and was glad he sought assistance. Keith said,

> I wanted to take out a second minor or double major, and they would not let me double major because they said I would accrue too many credits. They told me it would cost a lot more, so they would not permit me. I am glad they let me know that because I would have spent a lot more money.

Allison when to the financial aid department to ask for assistance about how COVID-19 affected her loans and interest. Allison said, "I was seeking information about the amount of interest being accrued and how my loan was affected because of COVID-19." AJ explained how his degree was a six-year program, and during his final year, he reached his aggregate student loan limit for an undergraduate student and could not borrow federal student loans to cover the remaining cost. AJ said,

> I think if I had to meet someone for a financial aid requirement meeting and they told me if you take this amount of loans now, you would not have any loans left in the sixth year ... the amount that I took from the second year and the third year was such a large amount ... I took an extra $10,000 because I wanted to move closer to the campus and it was going to help me pay my rent as well. If I had someone say, you take $5,000 and leave the other $5,000; then you will have some remaining for a six-year because you will need the money; that would have been huge.

Parent's Support

Two participants illustrated how their parent's support was needed when making financial decisions about their education. Anthony described how he wanted to drop out of college, but his mother stepped in to encourage and support him. Anthony said, "It made me not want to attend college anymore … It made me want to back away from everything, but my mom told me to keep going; we will figure something out." Cindy described how she wanted to switch schools because of the cost; however, her mother encouraged her to stay. Additionally, Cindy's mother helped her with completing the financial aid requirements because Cindy did not understand the process. Cindy said,

> I did not want to go when they sent me that email. I said mom, do not worry about it. I will try to go to community colleges, and she said no, you worked your way this far. I have my aunt to help us with financial aid and the FAFSA ... I gave my

> mom everything from financial aid to read and understand. At the time, I did not have a good understanding of financial aid or care about it. I just wanted to go to college. Once my mom and aunt read everything, I let them handle it. I did not have a good understanding of financial aid.

Subquestion 1

The SQ1 was as follows: How did students use the information they gleaned from the annual student loan debt notification? As presented in Table 3, eight out of 10 participants did not have their annual student loan debt notifications for various reasons; therefore, they used a copy of the sample notification emailed to them before the interviews. The sample notification is described in Chapter 3 and displayed in Appendix C. Four themes connected to the SQ1: Usefulness of the Annual Student Loan Debt Notification, Understanding the Annual Student Loan Debt Notification, Reducing Cost and Debt, and Adjusting Non-Curricula Activities.

Usefulness of the Annual Student Loan Debt Notification

Nine out of 10 participants described the notification as not useful or somewhat useful. One participant was confused about all the financial aid notifications she received and forwarded the information to her mother to manage. The participants described various reasons why they found the notification not useful or somewhat useful.

Three participants found the notification not useful. Rachel described the notification as not useful; she said, “I knew I needed to take out the loan, so I did not let it influence my decision because either way, I would have to borrow the money to pay for graduate school.” Ken did not receive annual student loan debt notifications from his college, so he used the sample for his interview. Ken described the notification and said, "It seems bare bones. It does not have a lot of data on it. If my university sent me that, it would not seem like a sufficient breakdown of what is going on financially." AJ said, "I feel like any information would have been nice to know, but I would not have done anything differently. It would just be money that I knew I had to pay back at some point."

Six participants found that the notification had both positive and negative elements. Flora felt the notification was moderately useful. Even though the information did not register to her early effort about how much student loans she would eventually borrow to complete the degree, Flora realized that she had borrowed a significant amount after her second year and decided to transfer to a more affordable school. Keith said, "I'm glad they sent me the notification, but it did not change how I felt about anything." Keith also stated that the notification is helpful. He said,

> I would add that I do not think they should take this program away by any means ... I think it is helpful ... Even if I missed it one year or it is not the most effective method of notifying students, I think it is still good that they do this.

Anthony said the notification "was not much help … but it did explain some of the fees and costs for certain things."

Kevin was the second participant who did not receive an annual student loan debt notification from his college. He used the sample notification for the interview. Kevin stated the notification could be useful; however, it will need to be clarified. Kevin said,

> It has useful information, but it is not as useful if you do not have an explanation of what each thing means ... the breakdown would be very useful … It would

> have been nice to know ... like a heads up of what I was looking at, especially for the future.

Lyn found the sample notification informative to be aware of one’s student loan debt; however, she felt that the notification looked like a reminder email instead of an important document to review and evaluate.

Allison described the notification as overwhelming, almost pointless, and stress-inducing. Allison said,

> The notification showed me a general estimate; it did not go into details about where they were getting the estimate or how it was being calculated. It seemed overwhelming because it was a larger number than I was expecting to pay as a minimum ... At the time, it seemed almost pointless but stressful because I knew my loans were going to continue to increase … I guess it was somewhat effective in letting me know my loan information throughout my program, but not effective in helping me plan to see how much I was expecting to owe in real amounts, not just estimates ... It did not feel specifically important to me at the time. I did not see it as something very effective at the time that I saw it. I do not know that it would cause me to borrow fewer loans because, either way, I would still need more loans to finish my degree.

Understanding the Annual Student Loan Debt Notification

Eight out of 10 participants found the annual student loan debt notification complicated to read and difficult to understand, and two found it easy to interpret and grasp. Rachel, who completed a master’s degree program, said the notification “was pretty easy" to understand. Keith, who completed a bachelor's degree program, said it was not difficult to interpret and was "pretty clear." The other eight participants shared their concerns about their lack of understanding of the information on the notification. They described how they were confused by the figures, the loan amounts, the calculation of the interest, and the financial aid acronyms, terms, and jargon. Table 5 lists why the participants found the notification challenging to read and understand.

Table 5

Using Notification / Usefulness / Difficult to Read and Understand

Participant	Used sample	Comments about using notification	Useful	Difficult to read & understand
Anthony	No	Used his notification	Both useful and not useful	Yes - Difficult to read; it had a lot of numbers
Rachel	No	Used her notification	Notice useless	No - Easy to read and understand
Keith	Yes	Did not have notifications; vaguely recall reviewing them	Both useful and not useful	No - Easy, but would still need an advisor for planning for the future
Flora	Yes	Did not have notifications; recalled receiving them	Both useful and not useful	Yes - Difficult to understand how monthly payments and interest were calculated
Allison	Yes	Did not have notifications; recalled receiving them	Both useful and not useful	Yes - Difficult because of acronyms and terms; there were a lot of numbers, and she did not understand how the interest was calculated
Ken	Yes	Did not have notifications; did not receive them	Notice useless	Yes - Difficult because of the acronyms and jargon; he would have to google the information
Kevin	Yes	Did not have notifications; did not receive them	Both useful and not useful	Yes - Difficult content to grasp and comprehend
AJ	Yes	Did not have notifications; cannot recall receiving them	Notice useless	Yes - Difficult; he did not understand loans in general
Cindy	Yes	Did not have notifications; cannot recall receiving them	Unknown	Difficult; she did not understand all of it. Her mother had to manage her financial aid
Lyn	Yes	Did not have notifications; cannot recall receiving them	Both useful and not useful	Yes - Difficult because of the acronyms and would need to read and research to understand the notification

Allison found the notification to be somewhat challenging to understand and difficult to read. She had to google financial aid terms and acronyms to identify the meanings. Allison also asked her father to help interpret some of the notification's financial aid terms and explain how the loan interest was calculated. Allison said,

> The notification was medium-level challenging; it was not immediately easy to read. I did not understand some of the terms and had to look them up. I had to take a second to go through it to help me understand what I was reading. Immediately looking at it, it was a little complicated. There were a lot of numbers, and I was trying to figure out if the notification was for immediate action, if it was for the future, or if it was even required for what I needed to know while I was in school.

Cindy stated that the notification was challenging to comprehend. Cindy said, "It was very challenging; everything was over my head. I needed them to explain everything." Kevin stated the notification looked difficult to grasp and challenging to comprehend. "It does tell me that I have an outstanding balance, but I feel the gravity of it is heavy ... Yeah, pretty challenging." Lyn said, "I do not get what the acronym FFELP means." Ken stated, "There are several acronyms I would have to google to figure out what they mean ... It was difficult to interpret; you needed someone to help you ... It is a kind of jargony." AJ said, "I did not truly even understand money to the degree I should have for being able to take loans."

Anthony was confused with the amounts listed on the notification. Anthony said, "It was very challenging because it had a lot of different numbers, and I did not understand what I was paying for ... it was just very confusing." Flora did not understand how her future would be impacted by her outstanding student loan balances, the interest rate, and expected monthly payments. Flora said,

> The parts I did not understand at first were the amounts and how they all came together and affected what I would be paying. Also, I did not understand the estimator tool and the monthly payments. I just needed them to explain how the percentage worked, when I would have to start repaying, and get an estimate of the amount I needed to repay.

Reducing Cost and Debt

Four out of 10 participants deliberated on reducing their education expenses or student loan debt because of the information on the notification. They felt that transferring to community college would reduce the cost and the number of student loans they would need to borrow. Three participants considered transferring, and one participant did transfer to a more affordable college.

Cindy was worried about the tuition and fees when she saw the notification. Cindy said to her mother, "Mom, do not worry about it. I will go to community colleges." Anthony described how he also wanted to transfer to a community college after he saw his notification with the cost; however, he was concerned that his academic credits were not transferable. Ken did not receive a notification from his college; however, he was given a copy of the sample notification. Ken said he would have considered transferring to a community college if he had received his notifications. At a community college, Ken would have reduced the number of loans he borrowed. At the end of Flora's second year at a private college, she was shocked about her student loan debt, so she transferred to a more affordable school. Flora said,

> I was very shocked. I did not expect my debt to be that high. I decided to switch schools because my loan debt was high, and I was about to be a junior. So, for the first two years, I was at a private college, which was expensive, and I did not realize how much money I would owe. I am only halfway into my education and plan to get my master's ... if I keep this up, I will be in a lot of debt. It shocked me to see how much I owed, and I am not even halfway through my education.

Adjusting Non-Curricula Activities

Four out of 10 participants described how the information on the notification caused or would have caused them to adjust their jobs or their efforts to find other sources of funding. Kevin was one of the participants who did not receive a notification from his college. After reviewing the sample notification, Kevin described how he would have looked for a job to reduce the number of loans he borrowed. Allison said, "I probably would have spent more time and effort looking for scholarships and side-type jobs to make money and borrow fewer loans." Anthony said he started working a second job after seeing the loan amounts on his notification. Keith described how the notification might have influenced him to change jobs because he realized the significant amount of money he was spending on his education. Keith said,

> I decided to take a slight pay cut and work at the university to reduce my commute and spend more time on campus. I would get my money's worth and utilize all the resources. I would be able to go to all appointments and classes on

campus … there is a chance that the information reminded me of how much I am spending and how much I should utilize my short time there to get the most out of it.

Subquestion 2

Three themes emerged from SQ2: How did the information change their view/behavior with respect to their education? The themes were Unexpected Loan Balances, Other Funding Options, and College is Expensive. After reviewing the notification, some participants changed their views about the number of loans they borrowed and the cost of college. Some also changed their behaviors by seeking other funding options.

Unexpected Loan Balances

Six participants' views changed after they reviewed the notification about their student loan debt balances. They were shocked and did not expect their balances to be what they were. Rachel said, "The amount I would be paying after graduating was much more than I expected." Allison described how her views changed about her student loan debt and her expected minimum monthly payments because the amounts were more significant on the notification than expected.

Table 6

Participants With Student Loans Higher Than Expected

Participants	Loans higher than expected
Flora	She knew her education would cost a lot, but she did not realize it would be more than she expected.
Allison	The amounts were more significant on the notification than she expected.
Ken	Everybody he knew who took out loans is paying more than they signed up for, or it is not exactly what they thought it was.
Kevin	He would have been more conservative with borrowing student loans because he feels like he is “swimming in” student loan debt.
Rachel	She would have to repay much more than she expected.
Anthony	He was shocked by the information on the notification because it was not what he expected.

Flora saw her notification and was not expecting her student loan debt to be that substantial. Flora knew her education would cost a lot; however, she did not realize it would be more than she expected. After reviewing the information on the notification, Flora decided to transfer to a more affordable college.

Ken and Kevin used the sample notification because they never received their annual student loan debt notifications. After Ken reviewed the sample notification and reflected on his current loan balance, he said, “Everybody I know who took out loans usually ended up paying more than what they signed up for, or it is not exactly what they thought it was.” Kevin described how his views would have been more conservative with borrowing student loans because he feels he is “swimming in” student loan debt. Anthony was shocked by the information on the notification because it was not what he expected. As a result, Anthony wanted to transfer to a different school to reduce expenses.

Other Funding Options

After reviewing the notification and realizing the signification amount of student loans they borrowed, participants attempted to find other means to help pay for their education. Flora and Allison applied for scholarships, and AJ started looking for employment. Others wanted to reduce the amount they were borrowing by transferring to a lesser-cost college, and some said they would have saved more or asked family members for financial help. Table 7 outlines the five participants who regretted borrowing a large amount of student loans.

Table 7

Participants Regretted Borrowing Student Loans

Participants	Lack of understanding and regretting loans
Flora	She did not realize how much loans she was borrowing, regretted and transferred to a more affordable school.
Allison	She would have tried to find other funding to reduce the number of loans she borrowed.
Ken	If he had gotten the notification, he would have made different decisions and not taken out loans.
Kevin	If he had gotten the notification, he would have been more conservative with loans.
AJ	If he had paid attention to the notifications, he would have tried to obtain funding besides loans.

Flora said she saw her student loan debt balance because of the notification. As a result, she applied for many scholarships and transferred to a more affordable college. Allison described how she would have liked to spend more effort on applying for scholarships and possibly get a side job to reduce the number of loans she borrowed, but she could not because she was in an accelerated program. Ken said that his views and actions would have been different if he had gotten the notifications from his college. Ken said,

> I knew approximately how much student loan I was going to owe. If they had sent me this calculation, this calculator, or if I had gotten this information earlier, I probably would have made different decisions. I would not take out loans ... I probably would have fought harder for student aid ... I would have made efforts not to take loans ... I would have considered going to different schools.

AJ stated that if he had paid attention to the notifications, he would have tried to obtain funding besides loans. AJ said he could have worked or asked family members for financial help. Anthony explained how the notification made him want to drop out of college. He said, “It made me want to back away from everything.” Kevin expressed that his views and actions would be different if he had gotten his notifications. Kevin said,

> I would have been more conservative with my borrowing or tried to plan better. If I knew ahead of time how much I was expected to pay for future semesters, I could have tried to save ... I would have been more conservative with loans or looked for more options as far as funding goes ... I probably would have looked for job options for sure. I would have looked more at what I was borrowing and probably worked to help pay for my fees as I went to school.

College is Expensive

After reviewing the notification and seeing the amount of student loan debt they borrowed, five participants found that their views about the cost of college changed. Keith stated that he knew college was expensive; however, it was more than he would have liked to spend. Keith also said, “I knew how much I was taking out, but looking at it again, all in one place, it seemed like a lot ... but the principle is, the cost of tuition is pretty high.” Flora did not realize private college was expensive for her and her parents, and after reviewing the notification, her views changed, and she transferred to a more affordable school.

Rachel views also changed about the cost of graduate school. Rachel said, “I knew it would be around that price ... It was a lot of money to borrow, and the interest rates were high. I knew it was going to be very expensive to pay back … It was just a shock because of how expensive grad school was.” Allison and Kevin described how they realized the cost of college was expensive for them. Allison said, “I started by realizing how expensive college was.” Kevin said, “the cost of going to school is really high.”

Subquestion 3

Two themes emerged from SQ3: What additional support would help students make sound financial decisions related to their education? The themes were: Support from a Financial Aid Advisor and Preferred Delivery Method of Communication. Most participants needed support from a financial aid advisor to help them make sound financial decisions related to their education. Some participants wanted their college to enhance how it disseminates information to the students.

Support From a Financial Aid Advisor

Nine out of 10 participants expressed their need for assistance from an advisor from the financial aid department to review or explain information about the financial aid process or their funding so they can make better financial decisions about their education. Table 8 illustrates the participants who expressed their need for help from a financial aid advisor.

Table 8

Participants who Needed an Advisor

Participants	Need an advisor
Flora	Yes
Keith	Yes
Allison	Yes
Ken	Yes
Kevin	Yes
AJ	Yes
Rachel	No
Cindy	Yes
Anthony	Yes
Lyn	Yes

Keith described an example of how a financial aid advisor could have helped him estimate his monthly student loan payments based on his potential income to plan for his future. Keith said,

> While taking out these loans, it would be nice if somebody would break it down for you and say, this is how much you will pay per month if you continue on this track and take out this amount of loans. It would be more convenient if they explained it to you in simple terms, like, let us say you make $40,000 or $50,000 a year, then this percentage of your monthly income you will be paying to your student loans. I think it would be a good use of some of the university’s budget to have people break down the information for students.

Allison revealed that she would have paid more attention to information about her financial aid if it had been presented to her in person at the college. Flora felt that meeting a financial aid advisor to explain everything to her is more beneficial because the advisors clarify the information and answer any questions. Flora stated that some students might not want to be bothered or are too scared to call or visit the financial aid department to ask for help, even though the students do not understand the financial aid information or process.

Ken said he would want a financial aid advisor to review the entire notification so it is 100% clear for him to comprehend. Furthermore, Ken described the notification as having useful information; however, he stated that it would not be useful if an advisor did not explain what everything means on the document. AJ expressed that if he had met with a financial aid advisor as a requirement to review the notifications and other financial aid correspondents, it would have had an enormous impact on him. AJ said there were times when he believed he was making the right financial decisions; however, after reflecting on the results, he knew they were not the right choices.

Kevin gave an example of how financial aid advisors could have helped him make sound decisions about repaying his student loans. Kevin said he would have liked for a financial aid advisor to meet with him to create a plan or layout of how he could repay his student loans. The plan should include a breakdown of the total amount borrowed for the entire program. Cindy described how everything about financial aid was difficult for her to understand; she needed someone from the financial aid department to explain everything, but it was difficult to get assistance. Cindy said she was scared because she would have to go to jail if she could not repay her loans. Anthony said he needed a financial aid advisor to explain the total cost and the student loans; however, they were always busy and were unavailable to help. Lyn stated that meeting with a financial aid advisor face to face is best to understand and get clarification on student loans and financial aid concerns. Lyn said if she saw loan documents without an explanation, she would feel like it was a “ticking bomb.”

Preferred Delivery Method of Communication

Eight out of 10 participants concluded that the best method to communicate with them about their financial aid information is via emails; however, there must be an additional component. The eight participants also agreed that emails are a convenient way to be informed and are easily accessible. However, along with the emails, the colleges must make further efforts to ensure students read and understand the content in the emails. The eight participants suggested that in conjunction with the emails, the colleges should also contact students via text, phone calls, or even virtual or in-person meetings with a financial aid advisor to review the emails and explain the content. Many times, emails go unread or are not taken seriously because of a multitude of reasons. Table 9 displays each participant’s preferred delivery method of communication from their colleges.

Table 9

Participant's Preferred Method to get Notifications From Their Colleges

Participants	Preferred delivery method of communication
Flora	Face to face - 1st and only preference
Keith	Email - 1st preference with a text or call reminder. Plus, face to face and webinars
Allison	Email - 1st preference plus face to face
Ken	Email - 1st preference plus face to face
Kevin	Email - 1st preference plus face to face
AJ	Email - 1st preference plus face to face, webinars, and Zoom
Rachel	Email - 1st preference plus regular mail
Cindy	Email - 1st preference, but it needs to be comprehensive, plus calls and face to face
Anthony	Email - 1st preference plus face to face and Zoom
Lyn	Face to face - 1st preference plus emails

Keith described how he would have wanted the college to share information with him and explain the content. Keith said,

> It would have been nicer to get an email and a text message just because I am more likely to check that much sooner. Also, I would take it more seriously if the financial aid advisor called me and told me in depth that we want to remind you that this is how much you are taking out in student loans. The interest rate will be this amount, and you can use this calculator online. Or an even more ideal scenario, they would tell me exactly how much I would be borrowing for the degree or at least an estimate of what I would be paying per month. Maybe they could have spent more time on webinars talking about loans and letting us know that, every year, you will get an email, and it will tell you how much you are

taking out. I think meeting with the financial advisor, one on one, would be good as well.

AJ said he believes emails are the most effective method for colleges to share information with their students because emails remain in the inbox and can be accessed anytime if you miss them. AJ said, “I think it’s easier to find and at least still be aware of its presence. AJ expressed that the college should have webinars or Zoom meetings for financial aid advisors to review and explain crucial financial aid information to their students. Allison felt emails were effective; however, she would have paid more attention to the content if an advisor from the financial aid department had explained the information. Rachel thought email communications were okay, but she would also like a hard copy for her records. Cindy would like emails to be more straightforward and comprehensive. Anthony prefers emails; however, he wanted his mother also to receive the emails because she manages his financial aid affairs.

Summary

This study confirmed that many students depend on student loans to help them pay for college. Students borrow large amounts of loans even though they do not understand the obligations. Some participants were able to seek assistance from their parents, but many needed guidance from the financial aid department. After realizing the significant amount of loans they borrowed, some participants applied for additional scholarships and part-time jobs and even transferred to a more affordable college to minimize the number of student loans they needed to borrow in the future.

The results show that two out of 10 participants used the annual student loan debt notification to make financial decisions about their education; one participant transferred to a more affordable college, and the other decided to get a second job. One participant said he vaguely remembered seeing the notification, which might have been part of why he changed his job to be closer to his college campus. Three out of 10 participants did not recall receiving the notifications. Two participants claim that they never received the annual student loan debt notifications from their colleges even though all participants borrowed student loans within the timeframe when Statute 1009.45 was implemented. Two participants received the notifications and did not use them; however, they said the information brought awareness but did not cause them to make different financial decisions about their education (see Table 3).

Eight participants agreed that the notification had valuable information that could have helped them make better financial decisions about their education. However, they found the notification challenging to read and comprehend, as described in Table 6. They agreed that a financial aid advisor would be needed to review and explain the parts of the notification that were difficult for them to grasp. Eight participants preferred that the college share information via email (see Table 9). However, protocols must be available to ensure students review and understand the content of the emails.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This basic qualitative study aimed to examine how college students in the State of Florida make financial decisions about their education, with a focus on the influence of the annual student loan debt notification required by Statute 1009.45 and what additional supports would help them improve their decision-making**.** I explored what students reported as important when making financial decisions about their education using the annual student loan debt notification. I used open-ended questions to interview 10 current and past undergraduate and graduate students. The participants were 18 years of age and older and borrowed federal student loans between 2018 and 2021 while attending a college located in Florida. The primary data sources were the interviews and my journals, and they were also used to triangulate the data (Merriam &Tisdell, 2015).

Data analysis determined that 14 themes informed one research question and three subquestions. The following 14 themes were identified.

- RQ - Five themes: access to student loans, financial cost for a college education, growth & development, financial aid advising, and parents' support.
- SQ1- Four themes: usefulness of the annual student loan debt notification, understanding the annual student loan debt notification, reducing cost and debt, and adjusting non-curricula activities.
- SQ2 - Three themes: unexpected loan balances, other funding options, and college is expensive.

- SQ3 - Two themes: support from a financial aid advisor and preferred delivery method of communication.

In this chapter, I present the interpretation of the findings in light of the conceptual frameworks and the literature review, along with the study's limitations, recommendations, implications, and the conclusion.

Interpretation of the Findings

In this section, I describe my interpretation of the findings in light of the conceptual frameworks and the literature review. The rational choice theory and the human capital theory were the two conceptual frameworks. Both theories guided the interview questions and probes to elicit the participants' experiences and perceptions of what they believe is important when making financial decisions about their education. Becker (1993) described the rational choice theory as decisions guided by evaluating each option's costs and benefits and the human capital theory as an investment in oneself for future returns.

The literature review consisted of five key factors: (a) rising cost of college, (b) understanding student loans, (c) federal and states laws for student loan debt and affordability, (d) the impact of borrowing student loans post-college, and (e) the impact of borrowing student loans on the economy. In the following subsections, I describe my interpretation of the findings in light of the conceptual frameworks and the key factors from the literature review.

Rational Choice Theory

All participants described making financial decisions about their education using rational choice. According to Parker (2000), rational choice is making decisions based on maximizing benefits and minimizing costs. The participants' financial decisions ranged from transferring to more affordable colleges, returning to live with their parents, and enrolling in an in-state college instead of out-of-state.

One participant shared her experiences of transferring to a more affordable college because the cost of her previous college was out of her and her parents' financial means. Another participant described how he decided to move closer to his campus because of the commute; however, after some time, he realized it was not the most favorable decision because of the additional cost. He decided his best financial option was to return to live with his parents to reduce his expenses. Furthermore, the same participant also contemplated enrolling in graduate school; however, because of the cost of tuition and fees, he made a rational choice to postpone his enrollment until it was affordable. Common rational choices by the participants were (a) choosing to attend a state college because it was cheaper than a private or state university, (b) living with parents to avoid paying rent, and (c) enrolling in an in-state college instead of out of state to minimize cost.

The findings showed that, at certain times, all participants made decisions by evaluating the alternatives and outcomes of their choices and then selected the best options. According to Dung and Thong (2020), there are two parts to the decision-making process when using rational choice: determining the preferred outcomes and deciding what is it worth to you. Throughout the participants' time spent at their colleges, in some way, they all made decisions using rational choices that were linked to financial decisions about their education.

Human Capital Theory

Nine out of 10 participants described making financial decisions about their education while considering their human capital. Their primary goal was to obtain a higher education even if they had to borrow student loans. Sweetland (2015) described human endeavors such as obtaining a higher education as an investment because they will create future capital for individuals and society. Similar to the participants' rational choice decisions, there was a range of reasons why decisions were made based on human capital. These reasons included (a) attending college was the primary goal, (b) enrolling in a college for education and growth opportunities, and (c) enrolling in an accelerated program without considering the cost.

Nine out of 10 participants stated that they borrowed student loans because they needed to pay for college. One participant said the only resource available to pay for graduate school was student loans, so she "bit the bullet" and borrowed what was necessary to pay for the tuition and fees. Another said he borrowed student loans because that was how he paid his college fees.

A participant described how he realized that he enjoyed becoming more educated. He wanted to attend a college with a better education system and more growth opportunities. According to Rosen (1989), human capital theory suggests that a person's level of education correlates to their current and future outputs and income. The participant transferred to a college that met his requirements; however, he had to borrow student loans to afford his school expenses.

Enrolling in an accelerated program to graduate sooner, even though it costs more, is an example of making decisions based on human capital. One participant enrolled in an accelerated program and had to borrow extra student loans due to the higher cost compared to that of the non-accelerated programs. The findings showed nine participants made decisions where they decided to invest in their human capital without considering other options. At times the participants made choices to invest in their human capital, which was directly connected to financial decisions about their education.

The findings also showed that four participants would have used rational choice over human capital earlier if they initially had understood the significant amount of money they would be borrowing through student loans to complete their programs. One participant said that if he had known earlier the number of student loans he would borrow for his degree, he would have made different decisions like not taking out loans and considering enrolling in other schools. Another participant said that after he realized how much his college cost, he just wanted to back away from everything and drop out. Another participant said she transferred to a less expensive school after receiving her notification and realizing the significant amount of loans she borrowed. The fourth person wanted to transfer to a community college after she realized the cost of her college.

Rising Cost of College

In this study, it was difficult to identify why the cost of college continues to rise because the data collected were not from the schools' perspectives. However, the literature review described that higher education cost increases because schools create expenses based on their projected income instead of actual income; therefore, tuition and fees are increased to accommodate the schools' projected incomes (Bowen 1980). Moreover, according to Kimball (2014), supplemental aid from free money such as donations and grants is lacking. As a result, colleges increase their income by increasing tuition and fees to compensate for the deficiencies.

Nine participants' perspective about the rising cost of college were that college was costly. Mutual comments were that "college was expensive", "college cost was high", "the school was expensive", and "private school was expensive". According to Robinson (2017), the rising cost of higher education has increased faster than inflation. The cost was a concerning factor for nine participants. However, the participants continued their path to obtaining a higher education even though they knew the cost was high.

Two participants were able to alter decisions to remedy their college expenses by transferring to a more affordable school, and seeking additional scholarships, and obtaining additional employment. Three participants considered transferring to a community college because the tuition cost was more reasonable than at their current school. One participant inquired about items listed on their cost of attendance budgets because of vague descriptions or unspecified charges. As described in the literature review, schools determine all elements of their cost of attendance budgets without being subject to regulations for the components (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). The lack of cost of attendance regulations could contribute to the rising cost of college.

Considering the rising cost of college, two participants took action to manage their education expenses. The other eight decided to continue on the same path even though it was more costly than they had expected. The participants' desire to further their education was the primary objective; however, the rising cost continued to linger as a concern throughout college.

Understanding Student Loans

Eight out of 10 participants found information about student loans challenging to read and understand. Three participants stated that on the annual student loan debt notification, there were financial aid terms, acronyms, and jargon that they did not recognize. Furthermore, the eight participants did not understand information such as the figures on the notification, the loan amounts, how the interest and the estimated monthly payment were calculated, and loans in general (see Table 5). Fernandez (2016) described how many student loan borrowers lack the knowledge and understanding of student loans, including loan balances and terms of repayments. Six participants stated that their student loan debt was higher than expected (see Table 6).

Resources to help participants better understand their student loans were lacking at the school level. Moreover, nine out of 10 participants expressed their need for assistance from a financial aid advisor (see Table 8). The participant who graduated with a master's degree stated that she did not need assistance from a financial aid advisor at any time while in school. Three participants obtained explanations and guidance from family members, and two had difficulties contacting financial aid advisors because of the advisors' limited availability. The others needed financial aid advising for various reasons, such as planning to repay student loan debt, explaining how interest was calculated, and looking for scholarships. Five participants found that their lack of understanding of student loans caused them to make regrettable decisions resulting in significant financial liabilities (see Table 7).

Ineffective methods of communicating information to students could contribute to their lack of understanding information about financial aid. Eight out of 10 participants agreed that even though emails are the best method for colleges to share information, there must be additional components to ensure students read and understand the email content (see Table 9). The participants suggested that the colleges should contact students via text, phone calls, or even virtual or in-person in conjunction with emails.

Laws for Student Loan Debt and Affordability

At the state and local levels throughout the United States, policymakers have started enacting laws to address student loan debt and affordability (College Promise 2019). All participants appreciated the efforts to implement laws at different levels of the government, including Florida's Statute 1009.45. They understood that laws for student loan debt and affordability generally benefit students; however, they felt that delivering and presenting the relevant information using effective practices were vital.

Six participants described experiences of vaguely remembering the notification or not being aware of the communications from their colleges about the requirements of

Florida’s Statute 1009.45 (see Table 3). One participant vaguely remembered the notification. Three said they did not recall receiving the annual student loan debt notifications, and two did not receive it from their colleges. All participants acknowledged receiving the notification directly from their colleges or using the sample in Appendix A; however, eight expressed their lack of understanding of some or all of the content (see Table 5).

Three participants deemed the notification not useful. Two said the notification would not cause them to do anything differently, and one said the notification does not look like a good breakdown of his student loans. Six participants found positive and negative elements of the notification (see Table 5). However, they agreed that if they had received the notification or completely understood the content, then it would have been a resource to help them make better financial decisions about their education.

All participants suggested that colleges should implement additional resources to enhance the delivery methods of sending students information about financial aid, especially their student loans. Furthermore, nine participants agreed that one-on-one assistance from financial aid advisors is required to understand and clarify information regarding student loans (see Table 8).

Impact of Borrowing Student Loans Post-College

Student loan debt was a significant concern for all the participants, and many found their life decisions impacted. Six participants were shocked by their total student loan debt balance and expressed that they did not expect the balance to be that high (see Table 6). One participant said the amount she would pay after graduating was much more than she expected. Typical comments from the participants were: “I did not expect I would owe that much in student loans”, or “the amounts were more significant than I expected”, or “my loan balance was a lot more than I expected”. Doran et al. (2016) study found that student loan borrowers underestimated their student loan balances and delayed many personal milestones because of the debt.

Kienzle (2019) described how student loan debt would impact post-college employment and significant decisions like enrolling in graduate school and getting married. One participant described how he altered his plans to continue his education because of his student loan debt. The participant wanted to enroll in a graduate school; however, he postponed continuing his education until it was more affordable because of his student loan debt. Another participant accepted a lower-paying job so she could qualify for a federal student loan forgiveness program. The participant started working at a public school where she would be qualified to have her student loans forgiven after working at the school and making her monthly student loan payments for 10 years. Two participants were scared and worried about their future and student loan debt. One said that she would have to go to jail if she could not repay the loans and was terrified about her future. The other felt like her loans were like a “ticking bomb.”

Four participants regret not meeting with a financial aid advisor for assistance in creating plans to repay their student loans in the future. One participant described how a financial aid advisor could have helped him plan for his future by estimating his monthly loan repayment based on the loan amount he was expected to borrow and his potential income. Another participant said he would have loved for a financial aid advisor to meet with him to create a plan of how he could repay his loans.

Impact of Borrowing Student Loans on the Economy

The findings were based on the participants' experiences and future expectations. However, the economy would be impacted by their actions or lack thereof. Bahadir and Gicheva (2019) described how student loan borrowers are inclined to reduce their overall consumption of goods and services. Six participants expressed how their student loan balances or monthly payments were more significant than expected (see Table 7). As a result of underestimating their student loan monthly obligations, their purchasing power for goods and services was reduced. One participant described how she accepted a job at a public school because of her student loan payments. In doing so, she limited her potential income in the private sector; as a result, limiting her purchasing power. Another participant said he is "swimming in" student loans.

Limitations of Study

This study had 10 participants and was limited to college undergraduate and graduate students in the State of Florida. There were four active undergraduate students, four individuals who graduated with an undergraduate degree, one active graduate student, and one who graduated with a master's degree. As a result, limitations might have occurred because of the participants' different academic levels and different levels of understanding of financial aid information. Kienzl (2019) described how college-bound high school students lack the knowledge and understanding of basic financial aid and student loan information. Furthermore, there may be limitations because of the different types of institutions, such as community, state, and private colleges and universities.

Federal subsidized, and unsubsidized loans were only included in this study. Loans such as Plus Loans or private student loans were excluded and must be considered. My bias must also be a consideration because of my history in higher education and my experience working directly with college students. Another limitation is that eight out of 10 participants did not have their notifications for the interview; however, they used the sample displayed in Appendix A. Future studies could have participants using their actual notification or at least a sample from their school. All interviews were conducted virtually, and if the participants were confused or were using the incorrect notification, it was difficult for me to detect at the onset of the interview. Researchers will have to consider the difference between virtual meetings and face-to-face interviews. Furthermore, researchers will have to consider a larger participant pool, an equal number of students from all academic levels, all types of student loans, and all types of colleges and universities.

Recommendations

Reflecting on this study, I determined that there are parts of this study that needs further research. The additional research can include the best methods to disseminate information to the students, whether the data reaches the students, whether it triggers a shift from human capital to rational choice decision-making, and whether the content is comprehensive. Kienzl (2019) stated that many students could not access personalized student loan information to help them make informed decisions.

This study's framework could be used in similar studies in other states or federal levels to determine if other student loan debt and affordability laws serve their intended purposes. For example, future studies can include how students receive information about loan forgiveness programs, whether the content is comprehensive, and if the schools provide sufficient financial aid resources. Moreover, future studies could be specific to academic levels, such as participants who are only undergraduate students, juniors, or seniors. Active graduate students or students with a graduate degree could better understand student loans because of their time and experience dealing with financial aid and borrowing student loans. Similar studies could be carried out for different types of colleges and universities due to the variation in the cost of attendance, campus resources, accreditation, and the student's history and experiences with financial aid and borrowing student loans.

Implications

This study has many implications for positive change at different levels: student, school, and state. The study focused on how college students in the State of Florida make financial decisions about their education, with a focus on the influence of the annual student loan debt notification required by Statute 1009.45 and what additional supports would help them improve their decision-making**.** At the student level, individuals could use the annual student loan debt notification to be informed, make rational decisions, and manage their borrowing accordingly. Furthermore, individuals could use the information on the notification as a resource to develop financial plans for their future based on their student loan debt. At the school level, colleges and universities could implement additional resources in the financial aid department to better serve students. The schools could implement resources to provide comprehensive information to students by training counselors and providing effective counseling, workshops, and one-on-one counseling with a financial aid advisor (Kerrigan 2020).

At the state level, lawmakers could implement processes to ensure laws like Statute 1009.45 is effectively executed and applied at the school level. In this study, two out of 10 participants stated that they never received the notifications from their universities, and three said they did not remember receiving the notification. If lawmakers implement practices to ensure schools are following the requirements of the law effectively, then students would have comprehensive information about their student loan debt obligations to plan appropriately for their future.

Conclusion

There was a gap in the literature that examined how college students in the State of Florida make financial decisions about their education, with a focus on the influence of the annual student loan debt notification required by Statute 1009.45 and what additional supports would help them improve their decision-making**.** I conducted this basic qualitative study, and it was guided by one research question and three subquestions.

This study explored what students reported as important when making financial decisions about their education using the annual student loan debt notification. This is especially important because student loans are an essential form of payment many students use for college expenses. These loans have rules and obligations that could be disregarded, especially if decisions are made based solely on increasing one’s human capital, if the information is complex to read and comprehend, or if students are unaware of the data.

All the participants favored the implementation of Statute 1009.45; however, the consensus was that the colleges needed to deliver and present information more effectively. The finding showed a gap in delivering and presenting the annual student loan debt notification to students. Sixty percent of the participants either did not receive their notifications, or did not recall receiving them, or vaguely remembered seeing them (see Table 3). Developing laws to help students make financial decisions about their education and effectively presenting the information will help them better manage their financial decisions and future goals. The benefits also ripple into society and the national economy by preparing consumers to have more substantial buying power and possibly reducing the federal student loan debt growth.

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Appendix A: Sample Annual Student Loan Debt Notification

Florida law requires ABC University to provide all students who have borrowed a federal loan through ABC in the 2017-2018 academic year an annual notification regarding their student loan debt. In compliance with this mandate, ABC is sending you the information below regarding your federal student loan debt. Please note that this notification is being provided as a tool to assist you in managing your student loan obligation and does NOT require you to take any action at this time.

Below is a summary of your federal student loan debt as reported on the U.S. Department of Education's National Student Loan Data System.

Loan Program	Outstanding Principal Balance	
Perkins Loans	$0	
Graduate PLUS Loans	$0	
Loan Program	Outstanding Principal Balance	Percent of Aggregate Limit Used*
Direct Loans and FFELP	$11,350	36.6%

*As its name implies, the Aggregate limit represents the maximum you may borrow in combined FFELP and Direct Loans in your current academic career. This limit varies depending on your student classification (graduate, medical, undergraduate) and dependency status. For information on loan limits please click here.

Detailed information regarding your federal loan borrowing history and estimated payments can be obtained from the U.S. Department of Education's Repayment Estimator tool. This free service will allow you to review your federal loan borrowing history and estimate your monthly and aggregate payments under a variety of repayment plans. You may use the Repayment Estimator by signing in with your FSA ID (which will automatically retrieve your federal loan history for use with the tool), The Repayment Estimator tool will allow you to determine your monthly loan repayment amounts, total amount of loans borrowed and potential loan repayment amount, including principal and interest, for the total amount of student loans borrowed.

Click here to access the Repayment Estimator Tool Page.

Should you have further questions regarding this email, please contact your financial aid counselor.

Do not reply directly to this email as it is being sent from an unattended mailbox.

This information is provided as a best effort on the part of ABC to provide information regarding your federal student loan obligations. ABC is not responsible for the accuracy presented in this email, the U.S. Department of Education's National Student Loan Data System, or the U.S. Department of Education's Repayment Estimator.

Sincerely,

Office of Student Financial Aid

ABC University

** Please **DO NOT** Reply to this email. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Office of Student Financial Aid. ***

Appendix B: Free College State Programs

Policymakers at the state level have started to enact laws to address student loan debt and affordability throughout the U.S (College Promise, 2019). Some states work directly with public colleges and universities to grant students free tuition for the first two years of college. Other local programs may include awarding private grants and scholarships to students with financial needs. According to College Promise, 24 states have enacted laws for free tuition at state and local colleges.

College Promise Campaign

April 24, 2019

National Landscape

Statewide Promise Programs

State	Governor	Promise Program
AR	Asa Hutchinson	Arkansas Future Grant
CA	Gavin Newsom	California College Promise Grant
DE	John Carney	Student Excellence Equals Degree (SEED)
HI	David Ige	Hawai'i Promise
ID	Brad Little	Direct Enrollment
IN	Eric Holcomb	Workforce Ready Grant and 21st Century Scholars
KY	Matt Bevin	Work Ready Scholarship
LA	John Bel Edwards	Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS)
MD	Larry Hogan	Maryland Promise
MN	Tim Walz	Minnesota State Reconnect
MO	Mike Parson	A+ Scholarship
MT	Steve Bullock	Montana Promise Act
NC	Roy Cooper	NC Promise and Career and College Promise
NJ	Phil Murphy	New Jersey Promise
NV	Steve Sisolak	Nevada Promise
NY	Andrew Cuomo	Excelsior Scholarship
OK	Kevin Stitt	Oklahoma Promise
OR	Kate Brown	Oregon Promise
RI	Gina Raimondo	Rhode Island Promise
SD	Kristi Noem	Build Dakota
TN	Bill Lee	Tennesee Promise and Tennesee Reconnect
WA	Jay Inslee	College Bound Scholarship and Washington College Promise
WV	Jim Justice	West Virginia PROMISE Scholarship Program and West Virginia Invests
WY	Mark Gordon	Hathaway Scholars

Recent Promise Legislation

New Promise:
AZ, CT, DC, FL, IA, IL, MA, MS, ND, NM, PA, SC, TX, UT, VT

Expansion:
CA, HI, IN, MD, NJ, NY, OR, RI, WA, WY

CollegePromise.org | (202) 569-3000 | @College_Promise @CollegePromise

Appendix C: Interview Protocol and Interview Questions

Welcome participant.

My name is Vijantie Boodoo and I am interviewing Participant #1 to gather data about what she as a student loan borrower report as being important when she made financial decisions about her education. Also, how did she used the information from the annual student loan debt notification and how did the information change her views/behaviors with respect to her education. Additionally, from the interview I will attempt to gather data about what additional support would help her make sound financial decisions related to her education?

Advise participants of their rights.

The participant has the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any questions or consequences.

Remind participants of how the interview will proceed and the technology involved.

The Zoom meeting will be audio-recorded, and the duration will be approximately one hour. All data collected will be kept in a secured file cabinet. Electronic data will be stored on multiple flash drives with password protection, and after five years, the data will be permanently deleted.

RQ: What do student loan borrowers report as being important when they make financial decisions about their education?

SQ1: How did students use the information they gleaned from the annual student loan debt notification?

SQ2: How did the information change their view/behavior with respect to their education?

SQ3: What additional support would help students make sound financial decisions related to their education?

Each interview question will attempt to identify how students are using the annual student loan debt notification to make financial decisions about their education as an investment in themselves or as a rational choice of being the best option to pay for their education.

1. Why did you borrow student loans?

   Possible probes:

   a. Please walk me through your thought process as you were deciding how to pay for college?

2. What information on the annual student loan debt notification caught your attention when you first received it? (If the participants don't have their notification, a sample from a large university in South Florida will be shared with them)

   Possible probes:

   a. Why did it catch your attention?
   b. Did anything else catch your attention?

3. How did you interpret the information on the annual student loan debt notification? Can you tell me about that?

   Possible Probes:

a. Tell me what information was easy to interpret and what was challenging to interpret?

b. Tell me how you reacted when you saw your student loan balance, interest rate, and expected monthly payments after graduating?

Possible probe:

a. Was it what you expected? Why or why not?

4. What information on the annual student loan debt notification did you feel you needed the financial aid department to explain to you?

5. Did you seek assistance from the financial aid department or someone else? Can you tell me about that?

Possible probe:

a. If you did get assistance, tell me what was the process and did it help?

6. How did the information influence your financial decisions for your education?

Possible probes:

a. Tell me, what are some examples? Some examples could be but are not limited to getting a job or increasing work hours, transferring to a lower-cost college, reducing full-time status.

b. If there was no influence, then why?

7. Can you tell me how useful or challenging the annual student loan debt notifications you have received has been?

Possible probes:

   a. How did other students react to their annual student loan debt notification? What did they do differently?

8. What additional information about your student loans would you like to see in the annual student loan debt notification and why?

   Possible probes:

   a. Why would the additional information cause you to borrow fewer student loans?

9. How was the annual student loan debt notification delivered to you, and would you prefer a different delivery method?

   Possible probes:

   a. Why did the annual student loan debt notification capture your attention immediately?
   b. How did you know what the annual student loan debt notification was regarding?
   c. What suggestions do you have for improvements? For example, should the financial aid officers meet with students individually to review the annual student loan debt notification, or should there be more efforts on the university's part to bring awareness of this annual student loan debt notification, or should there be a required webinar for students to attend after receiving the annual student loan debt notification?

10. Is there anything else you would like to add?