

## **Turning Uncertainty into Certainty: How High Schoolers Strategize Their Plans to College**

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In 2019, with supports from the IRIS award, I was able to travel to Taiwan to conduct my follow-up studies. In particular, I examine two questions: first, how do high schoolers navigate a highly quantified college admission system to procure favorable admission outcomes in a relatively transparent system? Second, how do class, gender, and race influence students' college navigation trajectories? I contextualize these questions in a country where the college entrance exam is utilized to determine students' college entrance and admission criteria are uniformly transparent. I interviewed 28 high school graduates to examine how they use available information strategically and whether the transparency of the system equalizes college access for disadvantaged students.

From June to July, I traveled to Eastern, Central, Northern Taiwan, and interview high school graduates who have gone through the admission processes. I recruit students who scored high, average, and low, and interviewed high schoolers who ended up with different tiers of universities. I asked how high schoolers strategize their plans, how they collect information to illuminate uncertainty throughout the admission processes, what are assistance they have received, and whether this process results in better admission outcomes. I found striking differences between the high-scoring, the average-scoring, and the low-scoring groups about the activation of knowledge. For the average-scoring group, college knowledge dramatically modifies tiers of universities they have arrived. However, college knowledge is less important for the high-scoring group and the low-scoring group due to the constraints of exam scores. I have finalized the manuscript and submitted to a peer-review journal based on what I have found.

Traveling through Eastern, Western, and Central Taiwan also made me realized how physical distances between social places are turned into social distances between the privileged and the disadvantaged. The place students lived limited how they imagine possible options as they navigate admissions to college. For example, it only took me 1 hour to transport to Central Taiwan via high-speed trains. Yet, I took at least 3 hours to

transport via trains and scooters to interview students in Eastern Taiwan. The physical distance is turned into the social distance because rural students have to spend more effort to reach out to gatekeepers to illuminate the implicit part of the system. Even though students could access information via the internet, rural students do not fully benefit from the transparency of the system. I then paid for programming service to collect public texts to examine whether online discussion forums narrow this information gap between urban students and rural students.

In August, I moved from only interviewing students to preliminary field observations. I conducted digital ethnography in the electronic bulletin(PTT), the biggest online forum where every college student shares his/her experiences about how to choose majors and college. College students also share successful strategies such as scoring well, hiring tutors, going to cram schools, and tips for packaging application materials. Besides that, they share oral interview questions, dress-codes, as well as admission tips to persuade gatekeepers in order to pass the first-round of selection. My digital ethnographic observation mirrors findings from in-depth interviews. Currently, my following project tries to combine quantitative data with qualitative texts to see how students claim their “space” in this quantified system, and how knowledge is passed on between generations.

Through my pilot study this summer, I was able to establish preliminary contacts with several school counselors in two rural high schools located in Central Taiwan and Eastern Taiwan. I also visited the school principal in Yilan County. The school principal told me her struggles of to maintain the school’s academic ranking and college admission records, compared to other high schools. This goal becomes even harder when educators keep changing admission rules and criteria. I was surprised by how many challenges that a rural academic-oriented school encountered and how they perceived risks and failures. This theme of how the school and individuals face contingencies and cope with uncertainties to reproduce their social statuses becomes my main concern in dissertation.

From June to August, with the support from the IRIS award, I was able to collect various data sources, established contacts with key informants, and frame my research

puzzle. I am deeply grateful to the Institute for Regional and International Studies for this award, which has allowed me to make incredibly essential discoveries to build a solid base for my dissertation. I also submit my first manuscript throughout my academic career in a relatively early stage. Thus, this grant has been a significant benefit to my progress.