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In Their Own Words: High-Achieving, Low-Income Community College Students  
Talk about Supports and Obstacles to their Success

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Education

in

Teaching and Learning

by

Carmen Ana Carrasquillo

Committee in charge:

Professor Amanda Datnow, Chair  
Professor Ross Frank  
Professor James Levin

2013

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The Dissertation of Carmen Ana Carrasquillo is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2013

DEDICATION

Para mi madre

Te quiero con todo mi corazón

Mil gracias

por lo que me enseñaste

por lo que sembraste

Te adoro.

For my mother

I love you with all my heart.

A million thanks

For all you have taught me

For all you have planted

I adore you.

## EPIGRAPH

Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night and light and the half light,  
I would spread the cloths under your feet:  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

William Butler Yeats

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I would also like to thank the student participants who had the courage to share their stories with me. They have my genuine admiration and respect.

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English Council of California Two Year Colleges  
National Council of Teachers of English

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

In Their Own Words: High-Achieving, Low-Income Community College Students Talk  
about Supports and Obstacles to their Success

by

Carmen Ana Carrasquillo

Doctorate of Education in Teaching and Learning

University of California, San Diego, 2013

Amanda Datnow, Chair

Open-access admissions policies and greater affordability position community colleges at the forefront in addressing equitable academic outcomes. Yet, most community college students fail to complete their certificate, degree and transfer goals. The failure rate is particularly high for low-income, Black and Latino(a) students. Much has been written about these student populations. However, we know surprisingly little



about those who “beat the odds,” that is low-income students who are high-achieving. Even fewer studies turn the lens on the students’ voices. What characterizes the experiences of these “beat the odds” students?

With student voice at its center, this qualitative study investigates how high-achieving, low-income students make sense of the opportunities and obstacles they encounter at the community college. Students’ experiences and relationships are examined to discover to what extent they contribute to or impede their persistence. Also explored are the organizational factors that mediate the relationship between the students’ academic experiences and their success. A multidimensional framework that draws upon the literature on sensemaking, institutional actors and agents, social capital theory, and critical race theory guides this study.

This study involved individual, semi-structured interviews with 25 high achieving (GPA of 3.0 or higher), low-income (California Board of Governors grant eligible) female and male students of varying ages and ethnicities. Students were selected from an online survey sent to eligible potential participants. Interview data collected from three institutional representatives were also included in the analysis. Data collected from these sources were analyzed for experiences, relationships and navigational strategies. Student interview transcripts were constructed into four poems using only the students’ words and exemplifying the major themes of their success narratives.

Findings indicate that students encounter both economic and organizational impediments to their success but cite interactions with and interventions by institutional representatives as contributing greatly to their persistence and success in college. Perceived professorial attitudes and teaching practices were prominent factors. Students

of color identified socio-political realities, such as immigration status and experiences with racism, as barriers to their success. The study's contributions to extant research and theory are explored. Implications for policy, practice and future research directions are also discussed.

## CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Although Hollywood is perceived as the home of fiction rather than fact, popular films evince much educational power, shaping our sociopolitical perceptions and influencing our value systems. Indeed, popular cultural constructs of all types can cast us into roles of authority or subordination, a hidden curriculum that simultaneously dictates behavioral norms while it reinforces oppressive social structures. Critical inquiry about these issues can help demystify the insidious ways the media function to maintain structural inequalities, including those affecting the world of education. Most importantly, however, such social critiques, a basis for true engagement within a democracy, can do more than simply unmask educational inequities, they can help us address them in just ways.

Within the hierarchy of higher education, community colleges primarily serve the nation's economically disadvantaged. Although community colleges have served nearly 8.2 million students within the last three years (American Association of Community Colleges, 2011), they are too often denigrated. Hollywood continues that unfortunate tradition.

When the cameras are rolling, contemporary films do very little to depict authentically the social world of the community college. Larry Crowne, the title character played by Tom Hanks in a 2011 picture, faces many of the same arduous economic realities confronting many of the nation's real two-year college students. Joining the navy right out of high school, Larry is a hyper-dedicated fifty-something employee of a supermarket chain. Though expecting another Employee of the Year award, he loses his job because he does not have a college degree and enrolls in the local

community college. As a veteran community college professor, I have come to know many men and women like Larry. Yet instead of mirroring my students' complex lived realities, their true struggles and dreams, the film presents a shabby caricature of students as social outcasts scurrying about town on motorized scooters. As I have written elsewhere (Carrasquillo Jay, 2012), the popular movie *Good Will Hunting* similarly does real community college students a disservice by portraying them as inattentive and unmotivated compared to those fortunate enough to attend MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology).

Such portrayals are missed opportunities to heighten awareness of an important sector of higher education in the United States today. If it is true that the media function as propaganda tools that prevent us from analyzing our institutions (Chomsky, 1988; Giroux & Pollock, 2010) then these films' fallacious representations do not contribute much toward the current national dialogue on community college reform efforts.

Community colleges are in the spotlight as researchers examine a number of pressing issues about student retention and achievement (Gándara, Alvarado, Driscoll, & Orfield, 2012; Karp, 2011; Moore & Shulock, 2010; Park, Cerven, Nations, & Nielsen, 2013).

This dissertation adds to the conversation. Here, I present not fictionalized accounts but the real world narratives of diverse community college students. This study contributes to research on community colleges and student achievement by examining a little-researched phenomenon, the high-achieving, low-income student.

The results of this investigation reveal that disadvantaged students' academic success is largely dependent upon a host of factors, including the presence of intervening institutional agents and life-sustaining student support programs. Another major finding

is students' perceptions of faculty attitudes and behaviors as highly influential aspects in their persistence. For students of color, struggles with racism and negative stereotyping were cited as conspicuous facets of their college-going experience. Among the student narratives exist four major thematic strands: The Immigrant Story, The Second Chance, Leaving a Legacy, and Yes, I Can.

This introduction offers an overview of achievement trends at community colleges, a brief profile of the disadvantaged, high-achieving student phenomenon being studied here, a rationale for the study (including the results of a pilot study), a study overview, and a description of the dissertation's organization.

### **Overview of Achievement Trends at Community Colleges**

An open door admissions policy and greater affordability make two-year colleges an important higher education path for underrepresented, low-income, and first generation college students. While not all community colleges serve primarily economically disadvantaged students, the greater affordability of the community colleges positions them as important avenues to higher education for this population. Yet statistics show abysmally low achievement, retention and transfer rates for this student population. This pattern is “nationwide, it is substantial and it has not diminished in the last fifteen years” (Bok, 2003, p. 20). At the first ever White House summit on community colleges held on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010, President Obama called two-year colleges the “keys to the future of our country” but also pointed out that more than half of those who enter fail to earn a two-year degree or transfer to earn a four-year degree.

For low-income students of all backgrounds, the achievement and economic picture is grim. Although the community college is still the most affordable option, the

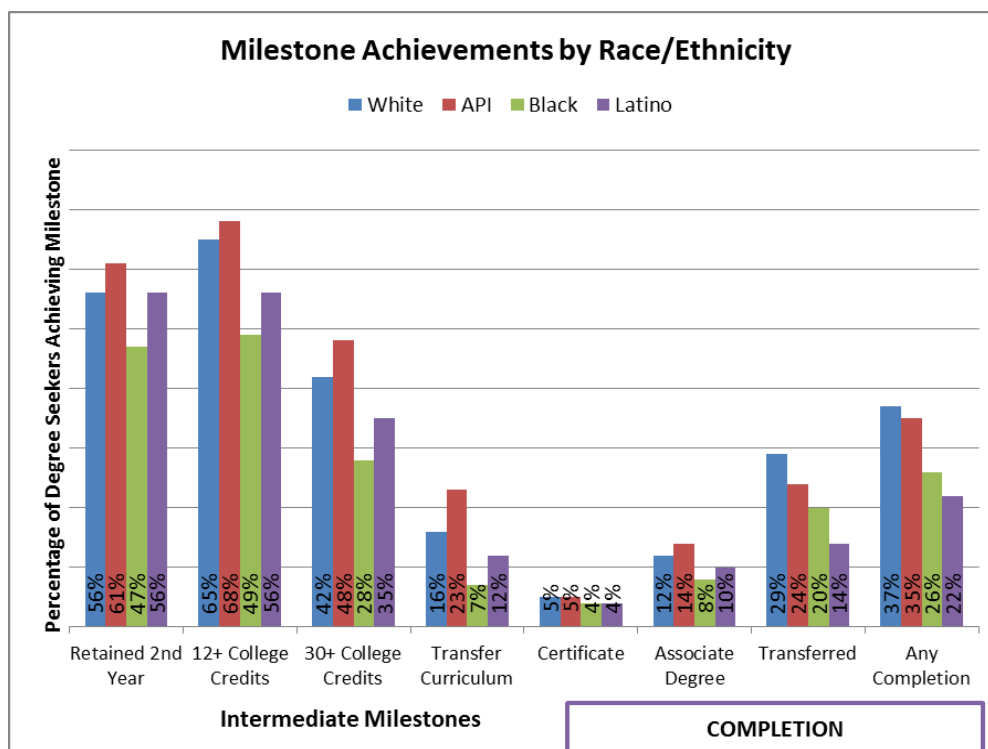
attendance costs (fees, books, transportation, etc.) coupled with the situation of declining income in the lowest income brackets means that low-income students spend 12% of their total income on college tuition (Dowd, 2003). The inability to secure enough financial aid, long hours working off-campus, and part time enrollment negatively impact low-income students' achievement and completion rates. Nearly 30 percent work more than thirty-five hours a week (Dowd, 2003). Research shows that "income remains a determinant of educational attainment" (Dowd, 2003, p. 112) with only 6% of college-qualified high school students with low socio-economic status (SES) earning a bachelor's degree compared to 40% of students with high SES. Low-income students will either not enroll in college at all or choose the community college; only 16% eventually earn a bachelor's degree (Dowd, 2003).

Black and Latino students are disproportionately represented among low-income students and have lower degree completion rates than White students (Dowd, 2003). Goldrick-Rab (2010) emphasizes that "in a country where substantial numbers of poor and minority students leave high school without a diploma and even more often without developing strong writing, reading, and math skills," the community college is the more affordable postsecondary path of choice for 58% of all African-American undergraduates and 66% of all Hispanic undergraduates (p. 438). Once enrolled however, Latino students' transfer rates are less than half that of White students and Black students do not complete half of their attempted credits (Moore & Shulock, 2010).

The most current research indicates this disturbing achievement trend continues for large numbers of California two-year college students. An Institute for Higher Education and Policy (IHELP) report (Moore & Sulock, 2010) reveals that after seven

years of admission, only 29% completed any milestones (certificate, degree, or transfer). Furthermore, Black and Latino students were far less likely to reach each of these milestones compared to their White and Asian counterparts.

According to Moore and Shulock (2010), longitudinal studies of more than a quarter of a million community college students show that 70% of those pursuing a degree had not completed certificate or degree programs or transferred to a university six years after enrolling. This failure to complete affected 75% of Black students and 80% of Latinos. Figure 1, adapted from Moore and Shulock (2010), reflects that for all milestone achievement markers, White and Asian Pacific Islander (API) populations outperform their Black and Latino counterparts.



**Figure 1: Milestone Achievements by Race/Ethnicity.**  
Adapted from Moore & Shulock (2010).

Many who have worked within the community college system understand that such statistics can be misleading because of the system’s multiple missions: some students wish to take only a few courses for job promotion; others seek to acquire vocational education certificates and not to transfer; still others enroll for enrichment purposes. However, as a veteran community college professor of English, I am aware that despite the multiple ways to define “success” or “achievement,” recent research paints an alarming picture of the state of equity at community colleges.

### **The Disadvantaged, High-achieving Student Phenomenon**

Despite this dismal picture, there is in fact a high-achieving, low-income community college student population which defies these odds, the “Honors” student. Some community college students earn the “honors” distinction as members of the



Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS) department. All 112 California community colleges have an Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS) department. Community college students who qualify for EOPS are classified as low-income based on a very specific financial need assessment. That is, their household size and income earned must fall within a certain range. For the 2010-2011 academic year, for instance, a student who is in a family of four is eligible if the household income does not exceed \$33,075 (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2012). Among the general EOPS student population are "Honors" students, who must earn a 3.0 GPA with 12 units completed.

Many California community colleges report higher persistence rates for EOPS students measured against the general student population. According to Berkeley City College, EOPS students maintained a greater persistence rate (defined as a fall-enrolled student subsequently enrolling in the spring semester) compared to the general student population (70.3% vs. 64.5%, and 67.3% vs. 65.4%, respectively) during 2007 and 2008 (Berkeley City College, 2013). The Rancho Santiago Canyon College District Research Office found that the 2009 EOPS freshmen cohort persisted to a second semester at a rate of 91%, a full 32 percentage points above the general student body (Santiago Canyon College Student Services, 2012). They further state that these statistics are typical of prior years. And a California Community College Chancellor's Site Review of EOPS at Ventura College boasts excellent figures, with EOPS students demonstrating a higher rate of persistence from semester to semester compared to non-EOPS students (73.59 percent vs. 59.12 percent) during the 2011-2012 academic year (Ventura College, 2013).

The Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS) has a civil rights history. As a response to wide social unrest in the 1960s, California lawmakers passed Senate Bill 164 in 1969, specifically to create EOPS and thereby address injustices and inequalities (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2010). Listed on the websites of most community colleges are EOPS' stated goals: 1) to foster the identification, recruitment, retention, and educational stimulation of students affected by language, social, or economic disadvantages and 2) to equalize the educational opportunities of these potential students. In short, EOPS is a social justice reform effort.

In efforts to promote the success of its economically-disadvantaged student population, EOPS requires students to meet with a counselor a minimum of three times during a semester. This requirement is in sharp contrast to the typical community college student's lack of communication with understaffed counseling departments. According to the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC, 2010), the counselor-to-student ratio of 1 to 1,000 is not uncommon in community colleges, where half of the students do not meet with a counselor during their first month of college.

In addition to the EOPS Honors student phenomenon, many low-income students also earn the "Honors" distinction by enrolling in the Honors Program. Over fifty California community colleges offer campus-based Honors Programs. The Rio Hondo College Honors Program, for example, offers a variety of honors courses that are approved for transfer to campuses of the University of California and California State University. To be eligible for the Honors Program, students must earn a minimum GPA of 3.2 and an "A" or a "B" in English 101, a first-year transfer-level composition course (Rio Hondo College, 2013). At Chaffey College, students must be nominated by a

faculty member, earn a minimum GPA of 3.2 and complete twelve college level units (Chaffey College, 2013). Honors students can also qualify for priority admissions consideration to a number of universities. The University of California at Los Angeles, for example, offers the Transfer Alliance Program (TAP) for community college Honors students who earn 15 honors semester credits, carry a minimum GPA of 3.25, and complete their declared major preparation courses before they transfer. Just as EOPS seeks to address educational inequity, the TAP agreement between UCLA and the community colleges was based on an expectation that culturally and ethnically diverse students would transfer in greater numbers to the university.

### **Research Rationale**

Whether they are members of EOPS or the Honors Program, high-achieving, low-income students are virtually invisible in the literature, but they do exist. Scant research has been conducted on these students who are apparently beating the odds. What can we learn from them about how they construct their success? How do they make sense of educational opportunities and obstacles at the community college? What role, if any, do institutional agents play in contributing to or impeding their success?

Why conduct a study on high achieving, low-income community college students? If the community college is thought of as an open-access, open-admissions field full of opportunity for low-income individuals, including first-generation to attend, immigrants, and people of color, it is unfortunately littered with mines. With 60 percent of incoming community college students enrolling in at least one developmental course and failing to move beyond the remedial level, many leave before receiving any kind of credential (Scrivener, 2008). Within their midst, is a high-achieving, low-income student

population we know very little about. At a time when initiatives funded by influential philanthropies such as the Lumina Foundation and the Gates Foundation declare as an important goal improving rates of completion in higher education, findings from this study could contribute to the field in informing policies aimed at students' postsecondary success.

Thus, I aspired to study community college Honors students in order to understand better how high-achieving, low-income students construct their success. I hoped to deconstruct the larger roles institutional structures play and the cultural, social, and political faces of reform. My study is guided by a multidimensional theoretical framework that draws upon the literature on sensemaking, institutional actors and agents, social capital theory and critical theory. To help me understand how students make sense of their community college experiences, I turn to individual and collective meaningmaking processes because they foreground the ways we co-construct meaning within specific social contexts. Widening the lens a bit, closer examination of college policies and practices is made possible when taking into account interventions by agents and the nature of various interactions with other actors. Finally, social capital theory and critical race theory are helpful for probing matters of social class, power structures, and racial discourses.

In the fall 2011, I had the opportunity to conduct a pilot study, an analysis of qualitative data based on interviews of three EOPS counselors. The following section describes the pilot study results, results which indicated the need for further investigation of the low-income, high-achieving community college student phenomenon.

### **Pilot Study: A Phenomenological and Computer-Assisted Interview Analysis**

The Pathways to Postsecondary Success Project is a study designed to achieve greater understanding of the opportunities and barriers facing low-income youth who strive to access and complete college. The multifaceted research study, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is being conducted by UC/ACCORD, the All Campus Consortium for Research on Diversity. As part of this study, Susan Yonezawa and Makeba Jones conducted qualitative research on the lived experiences of 80-100 low-income youth ages 16-19 in San Diego County. The team's focus was on the students' transitions out of high school and into the community college. In particular, the team sought to understand the interplay among youths' postsecondary education (PSE) perceptions, institutional and organizational practices, and various high school experiences (comprehensive high schools, alternative schools and small high schools, to name a few). Grounded in meaning-making, social relations, feminist, and social capital theoretical frameworks, the study aimed to inform future interventions for student success (Jones & Yonezawa, 2011).

As an assistant researcher on the study during the summer and fall of 2011, I worked on creating an understanding of the San Diego community college context for the team. In addition to providing portraits of specific colleges within targeted community college districts in the San Diego county area, I decided to arrange for and conduct open, semi-structured interviews at three different community college district sites. With the research team, I co-constructed the interview protocol for key college personnel, including administrators, faculty, and counselors. Included within the interview protocols are questions pertaining to my dissertation research interests exploring the

range of factors that influence the community college experiences of high-achieving, underrepresented, low-income students.

The interviewees selected for this pilot project represented community colleges of varying sizes, demographic profiles, and organizational structures. In my preliminary analysis of the interview data, I used a phenomenological approach to arrive at some understanding of the worldviews and perspectives of the participants. As Hycner (1985) has noted, “at the core of phenomenology is the very deep respect for the uniqueness of human experience” (p. 300). Given my twenty-year tenure as a professor at the community college, I wanted to bracket my “self” out and any preconceived notions I might have about what is happening with low-income students on community college campuses. The phenomenological approach gives weight to the voices of the counselors as they describe what their experiences mean to them.

The three EOPS counselors interviewed were a diverse group, one each self-identifying as African-American, Chicano, and White. Despite these ethnic differences, all counselors shared a common worldview based on the importance of social justice in education. I found that the EOPS theory of action is an equity model. Their espoused theory focused on agents of empowerment, high expectations for students, collaboration, and networking. This pilot study illuminated several factors regarding the academic success of two-year college students most at risk. The EOPS counselors articulated their philosophy of caring with community-building activities and interactional spaces intentionally designed to help generate student success. According to the counselors, the flow of information between counselors and students is a key reason for EOPS students’ success in college. I concluded that interviewing EOPS Honors students themselves could

shed more light on this phenomenon.

Reading how counselors perceive students' use or non-use of important networks made me eager to interview the students themselves. School personnel seemed to believe that there are network spaces in place for student success (although more are needed). Given these preliminary results, I believed pursuing the student as the unit of analysis could yield valuable insights about this beat-the-odds phenomenon. How would students describe interactions with counselors? With peers? When high-achieving, low-income, underrepresented students encounter difficulty, to whom do they turn to help them navigate rough seas? What stories might they tell about the relational ties that bind them to the college (or sustain them in college) and catapult them to success, especially given the fact that they are beating the odds?

## **Study Overview: High-Achieving, Low-income Community College Students**

The research questions that were addressed by this study are:

1. How do high achieving, low-income students make sense of the educational opportunities and obstacles they encounter at the community college?
2. To what extent do relational ties (with faculty, peers, or other actors) within the community college contribute to or impede the persistence of high-achieving, low-income community college students?
3. What is the range of organizational factors that mediate the relationship between the academic experiences of high-achieving, low-income students and their successful persistence within a community college context?

I conducted a qualitative study that included 25 male and female, low-income Honors community college students from a variety of ethnic groups and age ranges. The students were selected from an online survey sent to eligible, potential participants. In addition to analyzing the data collected from these 25 semi-structured interviews, I collected and analyzed 58 respondents' online survey data. Included in the analysis as well are the individual, semi-structured interviews of three community college counselors.

### **Dissertation Organization and Overview**

Chapter 2 places this study within the context of current educational research. I discuss the confluence of factors that impact community college students' academic outcomes. I also review key research in the theoretical frameworks in which I embed this study, including meaning-making, institutional actors and agents, social capital and critical race theory.



Chapter 3 explains the qualitative research design used to conduct this study, discusses briefly my positionality as the study investigator, and includes information about participant selection criteria, data collection and analysis procedures.

Chapter 4 provides a descriptive analysis of the community college student survey data. In this chapter, I begin to answer my research questions by examining survey responses about perceived opportunities and obstacles, especially the social and institutional factors students cite as affecting their success.

Chapter 5 presents community college counselor interview data results. The high-achieving, low-income student phenomenon can also be understood by focusing the lens on institutional actors within the community college setting. I explain counselor perceptions about empowering and disempowering institutional practices, including their visions for enhancing student achievement.

Chapter 6 provides community college student interview data results. Four hallmark transcript poems I wrote serve as an introduction to overarching themes across the collective. The transcript as poem technique uses only participants' own words, tone and diction and employs a variety of literary devices, including repetition, meter and stanza breaks (Richardson, 1992). I consider four major patterns: The Immigrant Story; The Second Chance; Leaving a Legacy; and Yes, I Can.

In Chapter 7, I offer a précis of the study's goals and findings in relation to extant research and theory, discuss implications for the community college mission and for institutional policies and practices, and recommend directions for future research.

I end the dissertation with a transcript poem inspired by Angelina, one of the student interviewees who is part of The Immigrant Story. Following the tradition of

dialectical anthropology (Tobin, 1989), I wish to deprivilege my researcher persona and shift the power of voice, the power to name their own realities to the student participants.

It is fitting that Angelina's narrative is the final voice of authority in this investigation.

## **CHAPTER 2: Literature Review**

This literature review summarizes the relevant research pertaining to this study of low-income, high-achieving students' California community college experiences. First, I will provide context for this study by synthesizing the literature on several factors affecting the academic outcomes of disadvantaged, underrepresented and first generation community college students. Further, I will review significant scholarly work in the areas of meaning-making, institutional actors and agents, social capital and critical theory.

### **Factors Influencing Academic Outcomes at the Community College**

As open-access institutions, community colleges serve students from wide-ranging academic, economic, and socio-cultural backgrounds. Community colleges function as important avenues to higher education for economically disadvantaged, first-generation, and underrepresented students. Full-time fees for one academic year at a California community college currently cost about \$1,104 for state residents (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2013). Although community colleges are touted as the more affordable postsecondary education path, it is not college fees that are the source of economic barriers for low-income students of all ages and racial/ethnic backgrounds. The Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy (Moore & Shulock, 2009) has reported that the largest costs students incur are in books, childcare, healthcare, housing, and transportation. In addition, the difficulty of navigating a complex financial aid process means only 15% of California community college students receive federal Pell grants. The government-funded Pell grant program awards financially eligible applicants who have not yet earned bachelor's degrees grants that do

not have to be repaid; they are the main part of college student financial aid packages. And although the Cal Grants waive enrollment fees and offer up to \$1,551 to qualifying students for non-fee related expenses, the actual non-fee cost of attending college is between \$9630 and \$15,588 per year when room and board are included. Unfortunately, the Cal Grant stipend amounts haven't changed since the 1990s.

Current research also shows that certain institutional practices present challenges for two-year college students. There is no standardized assessment and placement system for the California community colleges. Although the state chancellor has created a taskforce to examine assessment and placement issues, this non-uniform approach is confusing (Moore & Shulock, 2009). Goldrick-Rab (2010) notes that admitting all learners regardless of previous academic history translates into 61% of students who take at least one developmental course and 25% who take two or more such courses.

“Developmental” or “remedial” courses are pre-college level courses students must pass before they can enroll in the transfer level course sequences that can eventually lead to certificates and degrees. For example, within one college district in southern California, the developmental course sequence in English can translate into enrollment in thirteen units (Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College District, 2013). Given low-income students' part-time enrollment pattern, placing into the developmental sequence can indicate their lack of academic preparation for college (as well as for the placement test itself) and can present a serious impediment to their postsecondary success.

The longer it takes to get through the developmental course pipeline the greater the likelihood that students will drop out. The Pearson Foundation's Community College

Student Survey revealed that California students valued access to advisors, as well as relationships with peers and faculty, but 74% of all students who dropped out did not discuss their situation with teachers or advisors (Pearson Foundation, 2010). Both academic difficulties and personal struggles balancing work, family, and school obligations were cited as reasons for dropping out. As institutions respond to the budget crisis by cutting class sections and not hiring additional faculty and counselors, students are also unable to enroll in the courses they need or to seek help from advisors who can guide them toward program completion.

Success rates are also affected by what has been called the California community colleges' "students' right to fail" philosophy (Shulock & Moore, 2007). The authors describe the philosophy as "grounded in concerns about access and racial/ethnic differences in learning styles, language competency, and academic opportunity" (p. 13). In 1988, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) sued the California community college (CCC) system for assessment and placement practices they argued were disproportionately sending Latino students into developmental classes. MALDEF dropped the lawsuit when the CCC agreed to address this equity issue. Consequently, however, most CCCs' "right to fail" philosophy means students are not prevented from taking higher level courses before they achieve basic proficiency. At the community college in which I teach, for example, students can enroll in transfer level sociology, anthropology, or psychology classes, for example, classes in which students are required to write a documented research paper, even if they have not yet taken or passed a first year composition course. Two semesters of community college English, among other general education courses, are typically required by admission guarantee

programs for transfer into the University of California or California State University systems.

Other studies examine the experiences and academic outcomes of specific racial/ethnic student populations at community colleges. In particular, some researchers have investigated motivation and retention factors for men of color, as well as the relationship between engagement and academic outcomes for minority students. Gardenshire-Crooks, Collado, Martin and Castro (2010) conducted qualitative interviews with 87 African-American, Hispanic, and Native American men at four community colleges. Most of the participants cited a high level of motivation to enroll in college and pursue degrees, incidents of discrimination experienced on campus, initially positive experiences with counselors leading to negative experiences with faculty, and few close relationships with faculty. Many cited that one negative experience was enough to keep them from returning to school.

Greene, Marti and McClenney (2008) also address a specific population—African American and Hispanic community college students in Florida. In their study, they wanted to understand the relationship between engagement and academic outcomes for these students. Using a stratified random cluster sample scheme, surveys, engagement factors (class assignments, mental activities, and academic preparation), and several independent measures (hours employed, parents' education, single parent status, to name a few), the researchers found that despite reporting more engagement, African American students had lower academic outcomes than White students. Similarly, higher engagement by Hispanic students was exhibited in one measurable factor but they also earned lower grades than their White peers.

The researchers conclude that there exists an “Effort-Outcome Gap (EOG)--the result of having to put forth more effort in attempting to compensate for a pervasive combination of academic and institutional barriers to educational success” (p. 529). The EOG was found more prevalent among African-American students than Hispanic students, a finding perhaps indicative of the region. The authors report that Florida’s Hispanic community college students, largely Cuban and Puerto Rican, tend to be more educated and have greater English language fluency than their counterparts in other states. Nevertheless, both populations, African Americans and Hispanics, reported greater engagement despite lower academic outcomes. Taking into account previous research that has also found minority students report greater engagement, such as expending more effort in class assignments, discussions, and library use, the authors deduce that lack of academic preparedness and other factors (first-time in college status, having children, being a developmental student) could be associated with the Effort-Outcome Gap.

In sum, the studies reviewed here show that enrollment patterns, family and financial circumstances, and lack of academic preparation pose significant obstacles to low income community college students. The studies also suggest, however, that minority students are both highly motivated to attend the two-year college and are highly engaged once they get there. Nevertheless, the gap in achievement, as detailed in the Introduction, persists. In the interest of equitable educational outcomes, examining how low-income students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds make sense of their community college experiences was worthy of study. Focusing specifically on the ways high-achieving students construct their success, I sought to gain insights about the web of relationships that contribute to or impede their persistence. To better understand how

students traverse the two year college terrain, I studied how students' sensemaking is shaped by multiple interactions with others across a wide range of organizational factors. The next section summarizes the relevant research on sensemaking.

### **Sensemaking**

While much research has been conducted on the dismal educational outcomes of low-income, underrepresented students (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Moore, Offenstien & Shulock, 2011; Moore & Shulock, 2009, 2010; Shulock & Moore, 2007), very little research has been conducted on those who are beating the odds. And even fewer studies turn the lens on the students' perspectives. In a recent *Inside Higher Ed* article, Watford, Park, and Rose (2011) pose the question, "Where are the student voices?" Indeed, as Frankl so poignantly (1963) noted, human beings are driven to find meaning and "the perception of meaning" is based on "what can be done about a given situation" (p. 144). The process of identifying action entails taking stock of our circumstances as we strive to make sense of our worlds. Although making sense of our worlds can yield decision-making, there is a difference between decision-making and meaning-making. "[Decision-making] prompts us to blame bad actors who make bad choices while [meaning-making] focuses instead on good people struggling to make sense of a complex situation" (Eisenberg, 2006, p. 1699).

Meaning-making or sensemaking, then, involves ongoing, recursive efforts the individual makes to organize disordered information (Weick, 1993). Although sensemaking starts with the individual, the individual is not alone. Sensemaking is a complex, interactive process where "identities specify relationships that are central to the social nature of sensemaking among diverse actors" (Weber & Glynn, 2006, p. 1646).



Weick (1995) has explained that “the social context is crucial for sensemaking” (p.53) because the context is laden with clues we attempt to organize in order to resolve situations that are problematic. Furthermore, Weick (1995) has identified seven characteristics of sensemaking: identity construction-based; retrospective; enactive of sensible environments; social; ongoing; focused on and extracted by cues; and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (p. 17). Table 1, which I created after a review of the literature, provides a brief overview of these seven components. Of the seven characteristics, “identity construction” was a particularly salient variable for this study. For young adult students, their developmental stage, how they see themselves as students within the two year college context, and other impressions they have about themselves, are relevant to understanding how they construct their success.

**Table 1:** Seven Characteristics of the Sensemaking Process

<b>CHARACTERISITIC</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
Identity Construction	The individual extracts meaning from both the self's multiple identities and from interactions with others.
Retrospective	The individual acknowledges the potential for error in contemplating the past and needs assistance from others to make sense of what has happened.
Enactive of sensible environments	"Enactment" entails individuals co-constructing meaning with other sensemakers. The sensemaker creates the environment that creates the sensemaker.
Social	Sensemaking is both individual and collective in nature. Organizations affect sensemaking.
Ongoing	Prompted by life constantly presenting problems, the individual continuously engages in sensemaking.
Focused on and extracted by cues	During sensemaking, the social context directs the individual's attention to certain cues and cue patterns.
Plausible, rather than accurate	Subjectivity and plausibility are at play in sensemaking, not accuracy.

Sensemaking is also a useful theoretical framework for understanding the role of the institutional context in the lives of two-year college students. Institutions play an integral role in sensemaking because they "prime, edit, and trigger sensemaking" (Weber & Glynn, 2006, p. 1640). Institutions provide the "building blocks" for sensemaking, for as people assume a variety of institutionalized identities (typified actors), the roles they play within a web of relationships are affected by institutionalized expectations (typified actions) within diverse institutionalized frames (typified situations). Weber and Glynn (2006) also explain that since sensemaking is retrospective and ongoing, pre-existing ideas of one's roles as well as present communications, interactions, and reactions affect institutional influence. How do high-achieving, disadvantaged community college

students make sense of the obstacles and opportunities they encounter? What is their sense of the college's role in promoting or impeding their success? What notions of culture, identity, or community emerge from their telling? How does culture reveal itself in students' sensemaking?

To understand the cultural influences on sensemaking, Harris (1994) offers a five-pronged schema-based perspective. Schemas are the "dynamic, cognitive knowledge structures regarding specific concepts, entities, and events used by individuals to encode and represent incoming information efficiently" (Harris, 1994, p. 310). If applied to the community college, *self-schema* refer to individual college students' generalizations about themselves within the two year college context and involve aspects such as personality, values, roles, and behavior. Part of students' sensemaking as well are the expectations developed of particular persons and their roles within the college context, *person schemas*. Students' beliefs and values about college leaders, their peers, and others contribute to shaping their experiences. In addition, as social actors, college students are embedded within communities and social groups. Students' impressions and knowledge of these groups as entities form *organization schemas*; these schemas help us understand "how the culture of an organization is embedded cognitively in the individual" (Harris, 1994, p. 312). What a student knows about the culture of the community college and other communities to which he or she belongs plays an important role in sensemaking. Furthermore, *object/concept schemas*, knowledge about physical and verbal cultural artifacts, are also central to sensemaking. Understanding the meaning of "quality" or "participation," for example, facilitates communication (p. 313). Finally,

to interpret the meaning of ceremonies, rituals, and other events, individuals make use of scripted knowledge about many forms of cultural expression, *event schemas*.

Hence, to make sense of community college life, students use a wide range of knowledge about a social setting they share with others. Their individual schema are influenced by interactions with others. Culturally-based individual sensemaking, then, is a complex process. Individual sensemaking is influenced by conscious and unconscious considerations of the self and the self in relation to others. As the individual holds “internalized conversations with generalized others: the community or social groups within which the individual is embedded” (p. 315), or engages in “mental debates” (p. 315), or in conversations with “phantom others” (p. 316), many cultural influences come to bear on a person’s socially situated sensemaking processes.

Low-income community college students must make sense of their postsecondary lives by taking into account the economic, cultural, and political situations affecting their situations. Faced with limited resources, they may have certain expectations regarding the realm of possibilities available to them. Their perceptions about their status within the wider societal structure may frame their interpretations of opportunity access or opportunity denial. As members of certain cultural communities and social groups, they may seek assistance from more knowledgeable others as they actively make decisions and problem-solve the obstacles they encounter. And as social actors within specific organizational contexts (the community college, education itself), high-achieving, low-income students engage in complex sensemaking processes. How they construct their success is shaped by multiple interactions within multiple cultural, social, and political positions.

Writing about the lives of low-income basic skills community college students, Rose (2011) portrays their “hope and sense of possibility” as well as the barriers they must contend with, including housing, childcare, immigration problems, and serious illness (p. 38). One of the students Rose had gotten to know approached him for help when he suddenly found himself homeless. “Three of his classmates were living in shelters near the campus. A fourth had been sleeping for several weeks behind the dumpster by the library” (p. 38). How do low-income community college students beat the odds? What organizational structures do they use to help them construct their success? By interviewing high-achieving, disadvantaged students, I aspired to add to our knowledge about myriad aspects of this untold success story.

By incorporating student voice into such a study, I hoped to get a glimpse of the organizational and social aspects of their educational path within the two-year college setting and a greater understanding of the myriad factors influencing their meaning-making process. Furthermore, valuing students’ subjective experiences involves acknowledging that students are active participants in their co-construction of meaning in a variety of interactive contexts on a community college campus.

Sensemaking as a framework for this study provided a more holistic appraisal of the multiple interactive spaces on a community college campus. As students traverse the worlds of the classroom, the counseling office, or the tutoring center, they engage in dialogic spaces where information flows through complex arteries, the very life of their college journey.

## **Issues of Capital and Agents**

As noted in the Introduction, community college students who qualify for EOPS are low-income. However, low-income can also be defined in terms of the lack of access to resources, information, and opportunities (Chambers & Deller, 2011). Since the current study sought to examine how high-achieving low-income students make sense of the opportunities and obstacles they encounter at the community college, issues of social and cultural capital, and not simply economic capital, were relevant to the investigation. Given that socioeconomically disadvantaged students are less likely to have access to valuable social, cultural and political resources, approaching the phenomenon of EOPS Honors students' academic success through a capital framework was pertinent to this research project. To examine community college interactional factors or relationship webs that could be contributing to or impeding high-achieving EOPS Honors students' persistence, I will first summarize research on institutional agents.

Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) define an institutional agent as a significant other (adult family members, teachers, counselors, school peers, etc.) who plays a supportive, critical role in providing information about resources and opportunities and various forms of assistance that can empower low-income youth. "Actors" become "agents" when they use their positions of authority or exercise power to strategically support others. When the social interactions are based on trust rather than mistrust and the institutional agent is motivated to provide support, ties are formed that promote school success and social mobility.

Building on Bourdieu's social capital framework, Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) argue that for Mexican-origin, low-income high school youth, English language

proficiency becomes a “proxy for the accumulation of cultural capital” (p. 120). Their study also indicated that the strength or weakness of friendship ties with non-Mexican-origin youth, an important form of social capital, depended on family socio-economic status. Low-income students were less likely to develop friendly relationships with students from a higher socio-economic status, peers who could serve as institutional agents. According to Stanton-Salazar (2010, p. 32), “When low-status youth do overcome the odds, it is usually through interventions that embed them in a network of institutional agents connected to services, organizations, and resources oriented toward their empowerment.” Stanton-Salazar (2010) also points to the particular network orientations and ideologies of institutional agents. The effectiveness of the agent depends largely on the strength of his or her own particular social network. In addition, an institutional agent can transition to become an “empowerment agent,” whose commitment to advocacy is based on helping students engage in self-transformation that could yield wider societal change.

Peer networks can also function as a source of social capital. Previous research has shown that peer groups formed by students of color promoted academic achievement (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996). Walton and Cohen (2011) conducted a randomized, controlled three year trial in which they attempted to boost African-American students’ sense of social-belonging and found that the minority achievement gap was cut in half. In studying low-income high school students’ preparation for college, Jones and Yonezawa (2011) learned that when it comes to navigating toward a post-secondary educational future, the students have minimal contact with administrators, teachers, and counselors while relying primarily on their

peers, the Internet, and their families for information, families who lack postsecondary education knowledge and experience.

Since none of these studies examined the community college environment, more research was warranted. Are the peer networks of low-income community college high-achieving students influential in facilitating their academic success? What types of relationships do two-year college students form, both in and out of the classroom, and what role, if any, do these relationships play in their academic outcomes? What is the nature of the flow of information through these many-layered social worlds?

The world of the high-achieving, disadvantaged student could be thought of as an educational palimpsest, a multi-layered environment enriched by students' interactive experiences within numerous networks. Applied to a study of low-income, community college students, the Stanton-Salazar framework helped explain the roles institutional agents and institutional practices might be playing in students' against-the-odds academic achievement. When resources are interwoven throughout the fabric of the social structure and relationships within it, how do community college students gain access to those resources? What kinds of relational ties exist within the institutional social structure and within the students' diverse communities' social structures? What motivates a community college counselor or faculty member, for example, to engage in purposeful relationship-building to promote the student's academic success?

We know so little about the daily interactions of poor, two-year college students who return semester after semester, remain enrolled in their 16 week semester-long courses, and maintain overall GPAs that garner them dean's list distinctions and invitations to join the community college international honor society. Is the EOPS/



Honors student mobilizing resources via his or her membership within specific social groups? Social capital theory furthered my understanding of why these disadvantaged students are succeeding in retention, persistence, and academic achievement.

### **Critical Theory**

If the institutional agent can function as an agent of empowerment, then transformational critical theory offers useful tools for deconstructing institutional practices that serve to empower or disempower low-income, two-year college students. In a country beset by massive structural and economic inequalities, schools have been implicated in reproducing a wider societal structure that buttresses up a system of privilege and oppression (Bourdieu, 1986; Freire, 2007; Giroux, 1989; Johnson, 2006; Kincheloe, 2008; McClaren, 2006; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Shor, 1992; Sleeter & McClaren, 1995). The lack of financial resources has significant negative effects on academic achievement. Almost 40% of American families do not have enough assets to survive for three months if they were to lose their jobs (Johnson, 2006). The American education system reflects these circumstances by educating our children in separate and unequal schools. The EOPS Honors student, having reached and succeeded at the community college, has defied the odds. What values, beliefs, or attitudes are at work within the community college institutional context that support or inhibit disadvantaged students' academic success? Critical theory assists in unearthing ideological stances present within the community college's social structure and operating to exert some influence on disadvantaged students' educational outcomes.

In addition to being helpful for examining the power of ideology, critical theory can zoom the lens on how EOPS/Honors students understand their positioning within the

community college social structure. Lacking cultural capital, the ways of being that can catapult a student to success, EOPS/Honors students occupy a place of relative powerlessness within the wider societal structure and yet, they succeed. How do they make sense of their life circumstances and of their social worlds at the community college? Are there actions taken to resist perceived oppression on the basis of class, race or gender? How do they successfully navigate community college life despite cultural and economic inequalities? Since critical theory asks how and why knowledge gets constructed the way it does (Darder & Torres, 2003; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2000), what do EOPS/Honors students have to say about the ideas, pedagogies, and discourses they encounter in the classroom? Critical theory was helpful in identifying cultural politics shaping the interpersonal relationships EOPS/Honors students develop with significant others at the community college and analyze the power dynamics embedded within them.

In a 2010 report to the legislature, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (EOPS Student Demographics section) states the ethnicity of EOPS students statewide is a total of 37% Hispanic; 21% White Non Hispanic; 18% African-American; 14% Asian; 2% Other Non-White; 1% American Indian/Alaska Native; 1% Filipino; .6% Pacific Islander and 4% unknown/decline to state. Hispanics and African Americans are among the two largest ethnic groups served. Race and socioeconomic status are deeply intertwined in the United States. In advocating for research on populations who are poor, the American Psychological Association's Resolution on Poverty and Socioeconomic Status (August 6, 2000) acknowledges that:

Although Whites represented the largest single group among the poor in 1998, ethnic groups were overrepresented, with 26.1% of African Americans, 25.6% of Hispanics, 12.5% of Asians and Pacific Islanders, and 31% of American Indians on reservations living in poverty (National Congress of American Indians, 2000; U.S. Census Bureau, 1999), compared with the 8.2% of Whites who were poor.

In his work with low-status minority youth, Stanton-Salazar (2010) draws upon empowerment theory in critical social work. He posits that the institutional agent who makes the transition to “empowerment agent” is one who makes a “commitment to empower youth with a critical consciousness, and with the means to transform themselves, their communities, and society as a whole” (p. 3). The empowerment agent is shaped by Freire’s (2007) concept of critical consciousness, “the ability to perceive and interrogate the social, political, and economic forms of oppression that shape one’s life and to take collective action against such elements of society (or social structure)” (p. 25).

While some actors might be motivated to assume the role of institutional agent and provide support, they may not necessarily be interested in or even aware of the critical consciousness that has transformative potential in students’ lives. Rather, they provide support “as a means of enabling [students] to uncritically assimilate into the status quo” (p. 25). In contrast, the empowerment agent functions as an agent who facilitates for students an awareness of hierarchical social structures, institutional practices and conditions that constrain their success and who empowers students to confront oppressive structures for the purpose of “changing the world” (p. 26).

Scholars in the field of critical social work view empowerment as a process by which individuals move from an oppressed state of little power to a strategically

mobilized state of greater access to resources, power, and self-determination (Stanton-Salazar, 2010). The empowerment agent is willing to counter established social hierarchical structures on behalf of low-income youth. Stanton-Salazar (2010) identifies five characteristics of an empowerment agent who consistently assumes this role: 1) an awareness of structural forces within society and the institution that affect the success of low-status students; 2) critical awareness that the success of low-income youth depends upon their receiving systematic institutional support; 3) a willingness to defy societal rules that serve to buttress up resources within upper levels of the hierarchy; 4) identification of themselves as advocates for low-status students; and 5) a motivation and willingness to be seen as an advocate and agent for low-income students (p. 24).

Given the vast number of working class EOPS students of color, interrogating the nature of the students' relational ties via an empowerment framework draws attention to the sociopolitical realities of class and race within the two-year college context and the wider society.

Race is not biologically real but has been called the "central axis of social relations" in US society (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 12). Notions of race engender stereotypes, influence identity construction and create rules of conduct shaping daily interactions. Race has the power to shape our perceptions about differences as diverse as intelligence, temperament, manner of speech and dress, and matters of confidence and trust (Omi & Winant, 1994). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that structural and institutional racism results in wide social and educational inequities in a property rights-based US society. They describe the value of critical race theory (CRT) as a tool to help unmask the ways schools perpetuate inequality. Since critical race theorists emphasize

storytelling as a means for “naming-one’s-own-reality,” the authors assert this “voice component . . . provides a way to communicate the experiences and realities of the oppressed” (p. 58) and can effect healing from the stereotyping internalized by marginalized groups. CRT is useful, then, for examining the success stories of low-income students of color; such counter-narratives can afford us a glimpse into how race intersects with a variety of campus factors, including perceived opportunities and obstacles, relationships and interactions with others, and institutional curricular and instructional practices.

Applying a CRT lens to the EOPS Honors student phenomenon can also yield a more fully nuanced understanding of the ways social and cultural capital intersect with their educational experiences. While Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory posits that within a hierarchical society, middle and upper class knowledges equate to valuable capital, some assume that the significantly lower academic outcomes of people of color as compared to whites exist because of these supposed cultural deficiencies (Yosso, 2005).

CRT as a framework resists this deficit model and focuses instead on unacknowledged “community cultural wealth [that can] transform the process of schooling” (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). Figure 2 displays a model of community cultural wealth, one that refers to knowledges, skills, abilities and networks that represent various forms of capital. The model draws on the work of numerous scholars who shift the cultural capital discussion to one of assets, rather than deficits; strengths rather than weaknesses.



**Figure 2:** A model of community cultural wealth. Adapted from Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Yosso, 2005

Table 2 enumerates and describes the characteristics of each form of capital as summarized by Yosso (2005).

**Table 2:** Community Cultural Wealth: Characteristics

COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH		
TYPE OF CAPITAL	CHARACTERISTICS	SELECTED RESEARCH
Aspirational	Ability to maintain hopes and dreams	Gándara, 1982, 1995; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992, 1994
Familial	Cultural knowledges formed within kinship groups	Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Delgado Bernal, 1998, 2002; Rueda, Monzo, & Higareda, 2004
Linguistic	Communication and social skills in more than one language	Anzaldúa, 1987; Darder, 1991; Macedo & Bartolomé, 1999; Gutiérrez, 2002
Navigational	Ability to maneuver within institutional constraints	Arrellano & Padilla, 1996; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000
Resistant	Knowledges and skills of oppositional behavior	Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983; McClaren, 1994; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001
Social	Networks and community resources	Stevenson, 1996; Stanton-Salazar, 2001

While Ladson-Billings (2005) commends CRT scholars for re-configuring cultural capital conceptions by including Latino scholars' ideas about "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992), she nonetheless offers a word of caution. "... the institutions of a capitalist and White supremacist society will happily allow you to have your new forms of capital as long as they do not infringe on their old established ones. More insidious, they will appropriate your forms of capital and repackage them to produce their forms" (p. 117). Nevertheless, she dubs CRT a "theoretical treasure" (Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. 119) and encourages further analysis and application of this framework to a wide variety of educational issues, including curriculum, instruction and school funding (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Other scholars have found CRT a relevant tool for investigating the attitudes and behaviors associated with racial stereotypes and racialized experiences present in a range of educational contexts. Drawing from the experiential knowledge of people of color, researchers have investigated pervasive racial stereotypes at work in teacher discourse and curricular materials (Solórzano, 1997), the effects of race and gender microaggressions on scholars of color (Solórzano 2010), and African American college students' experience of and response to racial microaggressions (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2013). While this is not entirely a CRT study, the centrality of student narratives in this study makes CRT a sensible approach, used alongside the other theories I have drawn upon, for CRT foregrounds the voices of people of color, participants in the high-achieving, low-income student phenomenon.

## Summary

This chapter has reviewed the literature on studies relevant to the academic experiences of community college students. Researchers have provided descriptive analyses of institutional practices, such as assessment and placement procedures, that present challenges for community college students. Some qualitative studies have conceptualized approaches to interpreting the educational experiences of low-income and minoritized community college populations, focusing especially on issues of motivation and engagement. Missing from the discussion are the voices of high-achieving community college students themselves. Thus, a qualitative study examining EOPS/Honors students' sensemaking, including culturally-based individual sensemaking, about their success can contribute much to our understanding of the high-achieving, low-income community college student phenomenon. Applying theories about social capital, institutional agents, and empowerment to the supportive relationships EOPS/Honors students build within the institutional context can help make more explicit the roles relationship webs and structural factors play in student persistence. And because the community college is the college of choice for disadvantaged students, such research could address equitable outcomes, another important education reform goal.



## CHAPTER 3: Methodology

### **Purpose, Research Design and Setting**

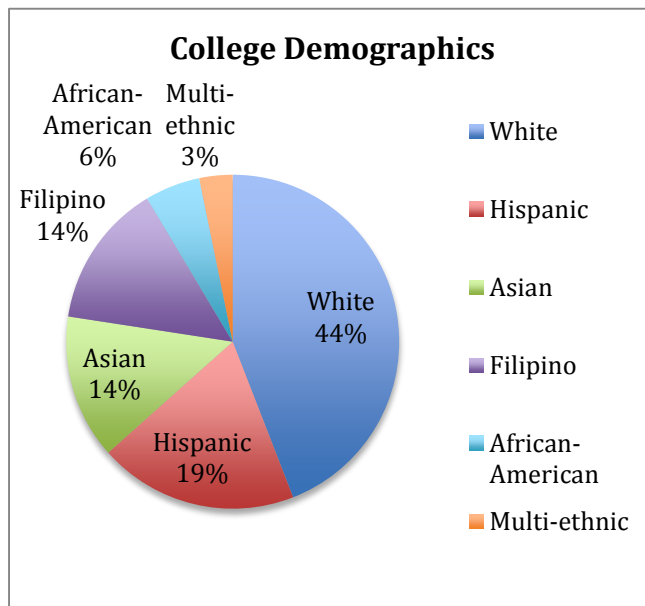
**Purpose.** The primary focus of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of high-achieving, disadvantaged community college students. The heart of the idea was to foreground students' voices in order to determine how they navigate college effectively despite economic, social, cultural, political and/or other impediments to their success. Since this research also seeks to determine the extent interactional and organizational factors contribute to or impede student success, a secondary aim was to examine the perspectives of institutional representatives, the community college counselors who interact with the students.

**Research Design.** The prominence of student voice in this study means that words take center stage; hence, a qualitative research design is appropriate in that it allows for close examination of individuals' narratives, richly detailed tapestries interwoven with people's perceptions and attitudes about their lives. Moreover, a qualitative approach provides for greater understanding of people's sensemaking about their interactions with others, an exploration of the how and why of difficult to measure human interactions (Agee, 2009; Glesne, 2011). Furthermore, employing a qualitative strategy enabled me to focus on interpreting and deconstructing students' success stories, for the main goal within this approach is "to explicate the ways people in particular settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situations" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 7).

Qualitative coding of student and counselor interview data allowed me to segment data into categories, determine patterns and themes, and use constant, grounded

comparison to arrive at evidence-based explanations of the phenomenon being studied here. Both online surveys and interviews provided students with the opportunity to share stories about social, organizational, and interactional aspects of their community college life. Using an interpretivist approach, I sought to understand the narratives as complex social constructions that intersect with wider societal assumptions and beliefs. The Human Research Protections Program at the University of California, San Diego and the San Clemente College District's Institutional Review Board both approved the research project and the consent process.

**Setting.** San Clemente College, a mid-sized community college in California, was the site for this study. San Clemente (a pseudonym) is a mid-sized (about 12,000 students) community college offering an A.A. degree in numerous academic disciplines, vocational training, and enrichment courses. Typical of California community colleges, the institution serves a dual mission: preparation for transfer to four-year colleges and universities, as well as training for vocational careers (police, fire, aeronautical, paramedic, alternative fuel technologies, etc.). The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office reports current demographics via the institutional race categories shown in Figure 3. Students identify according to one of six groupings provided by the institution. There are more men (60%) than women (40%) attending San Clemente College. Over 80% of the students are enrolled part-time. The average number of units attempted is six per semester. The following section describes participant sampling criteria.



**Figure 3:** Institutional Race Categories.  
California Community College Chancellor's Office

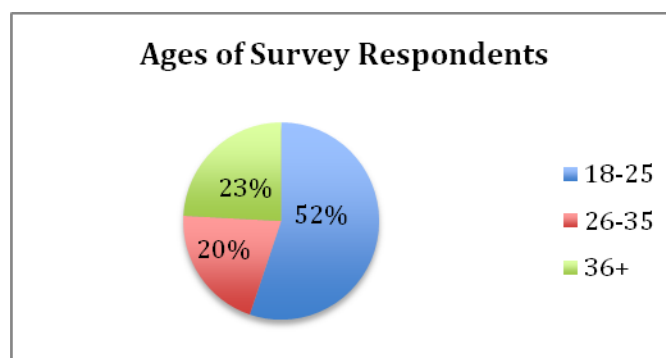
### Student Participants

This study focused specifically on students who were enrolled in Extended Opportunity Program Services (EOPS) (almost 400 during the 2010-2011 academic year, according to the Office of Institutional Research and Planning) and were considered Honors students by the EOPS Director's criteria (12 units completed and a minimum GPA of 3.0, E. Mendes (pseudonym), personal communication, January 16, 2012). Honors Program students who qualified for EOPS (51 during the 2010-2011 academic year, M. Green (pseudonym), personal communication, March 20, 2013) were also identified as potential participants in this study. The District Research and Planning office identified potential participants by generating a list of students meeting these criteria. In addition, flyers were posted in EOPS and Honors Program offices, distributed to students in classrooms, and sent to Honors students via email. To qualify for this

study, students had to have a GPA of at least 3.0, have completed 12 units, and attended San Clemente College at least part-time for two consecutive semesters. Participants were at least 18 years of age. All eligible students were contacted by an email from the District's Research and Planning Office to invite them to participate in this study. The initial announcement was followed by a second email reminder a few weeks later. Survey data were collected over a four month period from August to November 2012. Fifty-nine students expressed an interest in participating, received, and completed an online survey. One of the students did not meet the study eligibility criteria in terms of GPA, was not included in the survey results and analysis, and was not selected for an interview. At the end of the survey, students were asked if they would like to participate in interviews and provided contact information.

### **Demographic Profiles**

**Survey Participant Profiles.** The community college is a diverse educational setting and the survey reflected that diversity. Fifty-eight survey respondents represented a range of ages and also a number of re-entry or older students as depicted in Figure 4. Although more men than women attend the study site, survey respondents were mostly female (61%). The survey was anonymous; survey respondents were not required to reveal their names unless they were willing to be interviewed.



**Figure 4:** Survey Respondents' Age Ranges. (N=58)

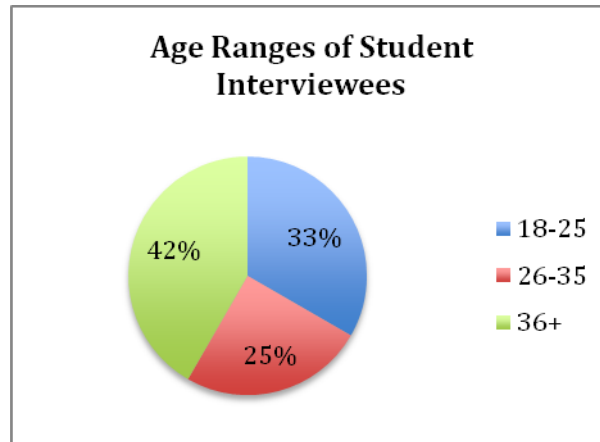
I also did not specifically ask survey respondents to select any of the institutional definitions of race typically provided by the college district because such federal standards about race and ethnicity, based largely on physical characteristics or social definitions, do not allow for self-identification via categories individuals may deem more representative. For example, concern about the limited range of racial categories has led Asian Pacific and Middle Eastern students to lobby for changes to the University of California application (Houry, 2012). In 2007, twenty-three new Asian Pacific ethnic categories were added to the University of California application as a result of these efforts.

In addition, rigid racial categories reinforce socio-political constructions of race, concepts that are fluid and shift with changing cultural, social and economic circumstances. As Omi and Winant (1994) illustrate, race is such “an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings” (p. 15) that racial categories are highly dependent upon ever-changing societal forces and undergo numerous re-interpretations. Hence, I believe that not asking surveyed students to select from federally-mandated

categories that position our rankings within the United States' racialized society opens the door for selected student interviewees to self-articulate their own racial identities.

**Student Interview Participant Profiles.** The 46 students who volunteered to be interviewed listed names whose racial/ethnic origins appear similar to the study site's federally designated demographic categories. I decided to select what appeared to be an ethnically diverse group for the interviews based on students' names and then recorded students' own expressions of their racial/ethnic identities when prompted to talk about their backgrounds during the interview. From those willing to be interviewed, I purposefully selected 25 male and female students of varying ages and ethnicities. I also ensured that there was a mix of student interviewees who had and had not indicated the presence of a specific mentor or guide in their survey responses. Only seven of the 25 interviewees commented about the presence of mentors.

The post-survey interviewees included both male and female students and were diverse in age range and ethnicity. Fifteen of the students were female; nine were male. Figure 5 shows interviewee age ranges by percentages at a glance. Nearly half (48%) of the interviewees self-identified as belonging to a historically underrepresented group, which is not surprising given that low-income status as defined by BOG (Board of Governors Grant) eligibility was a variable in this study. As compensation for participation in this study, all student interviewees received an Amazon.com giftcard in the amount of \$15.



**Figure 5:** Age Breakdown of Student Interviewees. ( $n = 25$ )

Table 3 categorizes student interviewees (all names are pseudonyms) by age range, gender, and ethnicity/race as *self-defined* by the student.

**Table 3:** Student Interview Participants, Characterized by Age, Ethnicity, Gender ( $n=25$ )

Participant	Age Range	Ethnicity/Race	Gender
Angelina	26-35	Jewish	F
Anne	26-35	White	F
Barry	36+	White	M
Curtis	36+	White	M
Delilah	18-25	Mexican-American	F
Ernest	36+	White	M
Farah	26-35	Iranian	F
Gloria	36+	White	F
Joshua	26-35	White	M
Josie	18-25	Filipina	F
Justine	36+	White	F
Kahil	36+	Iraqi	M
Kevin	36+	Black	M
Kim	18-25	Vietnamese	F
Leo	26-35	White	M
Lian	18-25	Taiwanese	F
Luisa	18-25	Mexican-American	F
Miguel	36+	Mexican	M
Nancy	18-25	White	F
Nazreen	18-25	Afghan	F
Sonia	36+	White	F
Sylvia	36+	Mexican-American	F
Tina	18-25	Mexican-American	F
Whitney	26-35	Black and White	F
William	26-35	Guatemalan American	M

## **Data Collection, Reduction and Analysis Procedures**

This study used three primary data sources, student surveys, community college counselor interviews, and student interviews.

**Student Surveys.** Fifty-eight student participants completed a Community College Student Survey (see Appendix A) which I developed based on themes that arose in the review of literature and theory. The online survey, which I created using Google Docs Forms, contained categorical variables (gender, age, GPA., etc.) that helped me select a smaller, more manageable sample size for the student interviews. Questions about participation in campus life and use of social networks, for example, helped me address my research questions centered on social and organizational factors. The survey also asked students about their experiences with faculty, peers, and counseling staff in order to get some initial sense of their perspectives about the nature of relationships or bonds formed while in college. There were opportunities as well for students to identify what they perceived to be obstacles and opportunities influencing their success.

Based on casual references from interviewees, the survey took about 10 minutes to complete. Scrolling text boxes permitted as much space as students desired to write more detailed responses to specific questions about their community college social world. Some students wrote detailed comments about “challenging” and “satisfying” classroom experiences and about mentors who guided them in their role as a student. Such data highlighted certain institutional practices students deemed either empowering or disempowering.

**Student Survey Data Analysis Procedures.** The online survey instrument provided me with a Summary of Responses option that I could view on a daily basis



while the survey was open for responses. I printed out the Google Docs-generated Summary of Responses and could see at a glance graphic representations of some of the survey data, including students' age and gender, students' GPAs, placement test results, and lists of courses students considered "challenging" and "satisfying." The computer-generated data sheet has some limitations. It is a brief summary only; thus, I returned to the survey form numerous times to see the rest of the data and found it useful to copy data segments into Word documents to manage and analyze the data more efficiently. I created my own graphic illustrations to visually depict pertinent survey data in Chapter 4. The online survey also generated qualitative data in the form of brief written responses. I printed out these written responses, counted and coded them manually, and determined precise percentages of the total responses each represented. I organized both the quantitative and qualitative data into a series of categories linked to the study research questions and useful for interpreting the data. A brief description follows; Chapter 4 presents a more complete analysis.

Survey questions about the students' gender, age, GPA, and other kinds of information generated a demographic profile. These data contributed to a general understanding of the students' backgrounds. Questions about assessment, placement, tutoring services, study habits, club membership and use of technology provided a snapshot of students' educational trajectories and daily routines as well as their attitudes toward the quality of student services on the campus. Since respondents were able to rank order "challenging" and "satisfying" aspects of courses taken, rate the campus climate, and rate their confidence in finding information about a variety of campus resources, such data were organized by percent of responses. Students' rankings helped

identify what students considered to be the opportunities and obstacles they faced in their post secondary education experience.

The survey also included questions about students' relationships with others within the institution, including counselors, faculty, and other actors. The survey document gave students the option of adding comments regarding their sense of the nature of these relationships (positive, negative, respectful, etc.). Students' responses were grouped according to similar percentages and were used to highlight the general nature of the relationships students have with institutional others. Organizing the data in this way facilitated comparisons among similar question types. Students' written responses were summarized and synthesized according to general patterns and themes. Graphic representations were used wherever possible for organizing and displaying survey results more clearly.

**Community College Counselor Interviews.** In addition, I gathered and analyzed the data generated by the community college counselor interviews from the IRB-approved (#081713) Pathways to Success: Maximizing Opportunities for Youth in Poverty study being conducted by UC/ACCORD, the All Campus Consortium for Research on Diversity. As explained in the Introduction, I personally conducted the interviews as part of my work with the Pathways project. Since the interview data is part of the Pathways study, no additional consent or release forms were necessary for the community college participants. The University of California, San Diego Human Research Protections Program granted permission for me to use the interview data. In addition, the counselors agreed that their interview data could be used as part of this study.

From among all the Pathways counselor interview data, I selected all ( $n=3$ ) the counselors who currently work in the San Clemente District. All three counselors have a wealth of general counseling experience and have worked in a variety of capacities at San Clemente. Savannah, a 34 year veteran, has chaired the Counseling department and is the director of the Extended Opportunity Program Services (EOPS). In addition to maintaining general counseling responsibilities, Adam has spent 16 years working on other special counseling assignments, including serving as an Honors, EOPS and Transfer Center counselor. Luke has 29 years of general counseling experience and has spent the last 14 years at San Clemente, serving as a Counseling department chair for 9 of those years. In addition to his counseling contract, Luke teaches General Psychology part-time. These interviews (see Appendix B) helped me address questions about interactional factors within the institutional structure that influence high-achieving, disadvantaged students' success. The interview protocol addressed questions related to larger institutional practices, such as assessment, placement, counseling, and tutoring. In addition, the interviews generated information about the perceived institutional role; the students' academic preparation for and support while in college; EOPS goals and approaches; ideas about contributing factors to student success; academic agent and counseling agent strengths and weaknesses; important people and programs on campus; and how the campus helped or did not help students meet their goals. Detailed results and analyses of counselor interviews appears in Chapter 5. The next section explains the methods used for conducting, transcribing and analyzing the student interviews.

**Student Interviews.** I conducted 25 semi-structured, open-ended student interviews between September and December of 2012. Interviews were audio-recorded

and were on average about 60 minutes in length. Twenty-four of the interviews were conducted in the campus Transfer Center offices. One interview was conducted over the phone. All student participants completed a consent form and an audio recording release form (see Appendices C and D). Interviewing the student participants helped me answer questions about the range of organizational factors that mediate the relationship between the academic experiences of high-achieving, low-income students and their successful persistence while in college. The student interviews also provided information about how students make sense of the opportunities and obstacles they encounter at the community college.

Interview questions (see Appendix E) elicited information about the details surrounding their daily life as a two-year college student; the specific positive and negative experiences they had on campus and beyond the campus itself; the roles of significant others and networks in propelling them forward to success; the social, cultural, political, economic barriers they felt they must overcome to succeed; the beliefs, values, attitudes, and perceptions they had about the community college setting and education; and the skills and/or knowledge they felt they brought to their educational life and aided them in their success. During interviews, students spoke quite freely about the nature of their communications with faculty, counselors and peers; what they thought about teaching and assessment practices, and the rituals and routines they had developed as part of their own success stories. In short, the student interviews generated information about how high-achieving, low-income community college students constructed and make sense of their success. I indexed the interview questions to link them directly to the research questions.

Because analyzing story-telling can offer insights into how students understand their personal educational experiences, I anticipated that the interviews would generate autobiographical reflections about the students' social and cultural worlds. This turned out to be the case. As students narrated experiences, at times pausing, at times weeping with emotion, they provided richly-detailed portraits of complex lived realities. Since "the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2), the interviews emerged as a collection of multi-voiced texts, sources of experiential knowledges and reflexivity. For students from marginalized populations, the interviews also functioned as counter-narratives to dominant discourses about their presumed cultural and intellectual deficits. As Solórzano and Yosso (2002) explain, "Indeed, within the histories and lives of people of color, there are numerous unheard counter-stories" (p. 32).

**Interview Data Analysis Procedures.** To think carefully about the interview data, I wrote interview summaries, engaged in daily journal writing, and used both digital and manual forms of coding as I searched for meaningful chunks of data. By writing portraits of the participants in a daily journal, I attempted to capture the voices of both the students and the community college counselors. I analyzed the descriptive portraits both individually and as a whole for relevance, co-occurrences, and major themes. Counselor interview data were organized by common themes, including issues with basic skills programs and assessment practices; institutional efforts aimed at boosting student success; and campus climate concerns. Student interviews were categorized into four major themes (The Immigrant Story, The Second Chance, Leaving a Legacy, and Yes, I Can). Analysis of the student interview transcripts also yielded "found poems," poems I

wrote using only the students' own words. The transcript as poem technique respects students' individual voices and highlights their "lived experience" (Richardson, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994). All names in the transcript poems are pseudonyms. Other identifying characteristics have been changed to protect confidentiality.

I completed a phenomenological and computer-assisted analysis of the interview data. After transcribing the interviews using InqScribe, I used a phenomenological approach to apply the "matrices of that person's worldview in order to understand the meaning of what that person is saying, rather than what the researcher expects that person to say" (Hycner, 1985, p. 281). Since erasure of the researcher's self is an impossibility, the phenomenological approach also encourages dialogue with others to test the validity of interpretations. Hence, I sought assessments of reliability to better elicit the soundness of my interpretations. Education Studies faculty and graduate students at UCSD provided their insights on the results of my ongoing data analysis.

Using HyperResearch qualitative data coding software, I coded the transcripts for units of meaning, patterns and themes based on the theoretical frameworks and research questions that guided this study. I also manually coded all of the interview data. Table 4 is a data collection and analysis matrix I created and found useful for coding and analyzing all data sets. I began with an initial list of *a priori* codes and generated new emergent codes as the analysis was underway (see Appendix F). Using open and axial coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), I generated themes and categories. Some initial codes used included: sense of belonging, bonds, teacher-student classroom interaction, and important relationships. As the analysis continued, some of my codes emerged from consideration of five key areas across the narratives:

- 1) elements of identity construction, especially any interactions with others that appear to be a part of the students' sensemaking about the opportunities and obstacles they encounter at the college;
- 2) how the institution "triggers" students' sensemaking (Weber & Glynn, 2006, p. 1640), particularly the roles, relationships and experiences students describe;
- 3) cultural influences on students' sensemaking, specifically, *self-schemas* (students' generalizations about themselves) and *person schemas* (expectations developed of particular persons and their roles within the college context) (Harris, 1994);
- 4) key critical incidents and interventions, notably the presence of any institutional actors, empowerment agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2010) or influential others students identify as contributing to or impeding their persistence and how they intersect with student identities;
- 5) the wider, socio-political context, markedly the perceptions about structural factors that mediate the relationship between the students' academic experiences and their successful persistence.

Codes that emerged from the ongoing analysis included: identity as achiever, sense of self as role model, aspirational capital, critical intervention by institutional agent, and tactics used to deal with discrimination. I triangulated the data, constantly comparing the survey to the two interview data sets, reflecting about my own positionality, and sharing my emerging claims frequently with others.

**Table 4: Data Collection Matrix**

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Process Data and Outcome Measures</b>	<b>Data Collection Methods</b>
How do high achieving, low-income students make sense of the educational opportunities and obstacles they encounter at the community college?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Details about beliefs, identities, attitudes, values, social and cultural influences, personality, behavior and community, socio-political factors</li> <li>--Perceived opportunities, obstacles, roles, sense of belonging</li> <li>--Strategies for success</li> <li>--Knowledge about physical and verbal cultural artifacts</li> <li>--Rituals, routines, events</li> <li>--Interactions with others</li> </ul>	<p>Student Surveys</p> <p>Student Interviews</p>
To what extent do relational ties (with faculty, peers, or other actors) contribute to or impede the persistence of high-achieving, low-income community college students?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Ideas about roles, institutionalized identities, webs of relationships</li> <li>--Communication, interactions, bonds</li> <li>--Details about intervention, services, resources, trust</li> <li>--Teacher-student classroom interaction</li> <li>--Counselor-student interaction</li> </ul>	<p>Student Surveys</p> <p>Student Interviews</p> <p>Counselor Interviews</p>
What is the range of organizational factors that mediate the relationship between the academic experiences of high-achieving, low-income students and their successful persistence within a community college context?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Institutionalized identities</li> <li>--Details about intervention, services, resources</li> <li>--Perceptions about empowering/disempowering practices, positive/negative campus experiences</li> <li>--Values, beliefs, attitudes</li> <li>--Details about structural, socio-political aspects</li> <li>--Details about teaching, the curriculum</li> <li>--Details about counseling, student support services</li> </ul>	<p>Student Surveys</p> <p>Student Interviews</p> <p>Counselor Interviews</p>



A rigorous discourse analysis of the transcript data provided insights into the interviews as social texts. This analytic process does not assume that participants' attitudes and values are unidimensional or fixed; rather, it acknowledges the multiple cultural identities participants can embody (Talja, 1999). This method can bring to light and resolve potential contradictions and ambiguities. Discursive practices are thus seen as context-dependent organizations of social realities. Discourse analysis was a useful tool for helping me to deconstruct how participants made sense of what was meaningful to them. Most importantly, since discourses mediate our conceptualizations of the world, scrutinizing discourse helped elicit a fuller understanding of the social phenomenon being studied here. Chapter 6 presents a detailed summary, analysis and discussion of student interview data.

### **Study Limitations**

With only 25 student interviewees, 58 survey respondents, and 3 counselor interviews, this study's small scale limits its generalizability and application to other community colleges. However, this research project is based on the assumption that talking to individuals in a particular context about their various perspectives contributes to our understanding of difficult to measure social realities. Moreover, searching for patterns among the participants' stories, this inductive research approach seeks to interpret the high-achieving, low-income student phenomenon through an investigation of people's own meaning-making. Hence, the goal was not to generalize to a population but to contextualize, deepening our knowledge of a specific social world.

Further limiting the study's generalizability is the fact that the student participants all came from one community college district. Community colleges in the state of

California differ greatly depending on the surrounding area's particular demographics, socioeconomic classes, and other characteristics. Nevertheless, some of the students in the study did have educational histories that included experiences at community colleges quite different from the study site and shared their perceptions about college similarities and differences. These comments were taken into account in the final analysis and did help to explain perceived differences in institutional commitment to certain aspects of their social environments, including campus climate and diversity. Although the findings of this study cannot be generalized to other community colleges, this research can guide future investigations that center on student voice, a primary goal of this study.

A third and final limitation revolves around the survey and interview data sets based on participants' own reporting of their experiences. Some may question the accuracy of their accounts. However, since the goal was to interpret people's constructions of their realities, this research does set the stage for a better understanding of intricate social interactions associated with this particular phenomenon. Undergirding this study is respect for the plurality of perspectives. Inherent in this research methodology is "a belief in the ability of ordinary people to explain the meanings of their actions and to analyze the institutions of which they are a part" (Tobin, 1989, p. 174).

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the aims of this study, portrayed the study site and its participants, and described data collection and analysis procedures. In addition, analysis procedures specified how the research questions were addressed. Study limitations were also addressed. To understand better what characterizes the experiences of high-achieving, low-income students, an online survey instrument and individual, semi-

structured interviews of counselors and students were used. The collected data yielded fertile ground, abundant in experiential knowledges and multiple meanings within the socio-cultural context of a community college.

The next three chapters are dedicated to a summary, analysis and discussion of the three data sets. After a thorough review of the student survey data in Chapter 4, I turn my attention to counselor interviews in Chapter 5 and student interviews in Chapter 6. As I unravel layers of meaning contained within each, the three findings chapters also engage in a multi-vocal conversation of their own, probing for commonalities and differences across all data sets

## **CHAPTER 4: Student Voices: Perspectives about the College Experience**

### **Introduction**

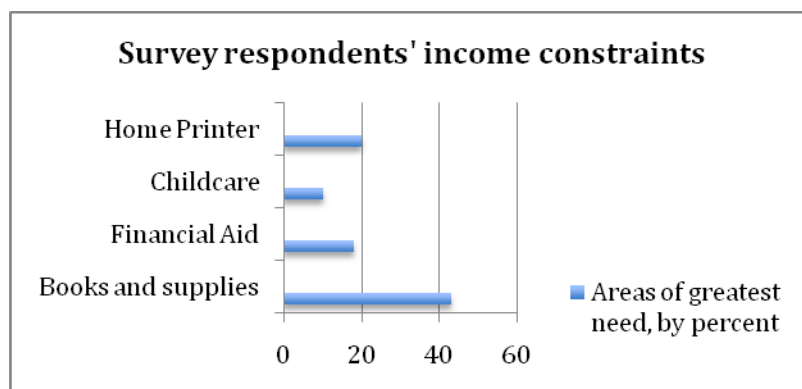
This chapter is a summary of the analysis of student survey data collected. The survey was designed to collect demographic information as well as students' general perceptions about factors that impede or facilitate their academic success. I also collected survey data about students' positive and negative experiences on campus (both in and out of the classroom), participation or non-participation in different social settings (on campus and online), and interactions with campus faculty and staff (both in and out of the classroom). Students had opportunities to write comments about "challenging" and "satisfying" courses and about mentors or guides they wanted to identify and describe. In addition, the survey helped me conduct a purposeful selection of student interviewees.

Survey results show students' perspectives about several factors that serve to either complicate or facilitate their college-going experience. Primary financial concerns are not student fees but other educational expenses. Other cited constraints include apprehensions about certain classroom assessment techniques and teaching practices. Writing about these experiences, the students display several cultural influences on their sensemaking, including self-schemas related to their roles as college students and their values related to education. Person schemas and organization schemas come into play regarding certain expectations they have about the role of college faculty and the meaning they attribute to their impressions about positive and negative experiences within classroom communities. While maintaining full-time enrollment status and seeking early assistance from counselors appear to facilitate their continued success, placement tests can present roadblocks. Students are quite solitary in their study habits

and do not feel confident about locating opportunities to interact with their peers. They do, however, mention engagement with institutional representatives, including naming specific “satisfying,” interactive classroom experiences characterized as rigorous courses led by knowledgeable and motivational instructors.

### **General Perceptions About Obstacles and Opportunities**

**Income constraints.** In this study, class is one common denominator across all survey and interview student participants. All students who participated in this study are Board of Governors (BOG) fee waiver eligible; that is, their household size and income must fall within a certain range. For instance, for a family of four, the household income cannot exceed \$33,075 (California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, 2012). Unsurprisingly then, thirty-seven percent of survey respondents work full-time while attending college. Participants also indicated specific financial concerns (see Figure 6). This finding is consistent with the research showing that despite the greater affordability of the community college, other educational expenses (especially books and mandatory classroom supplies), and work and family responsibilities are significant barriers to timely and successful completion (Dowd, 2003; Goldrick-Rab, 2010).



**Figure 6:** Economic "obstacles" selected by respondents

**Enrollment patterns.** As part of answering my first research question, I wanted to understand what strategies for success or coping routines high-achieving students use to manage the obstacles affecting their college-going experience. The survey indicates that despite the identified financial obstacles, 64% of high-achieving students enroll full-time (12 or more units) when they first begin college, and after completing two semesters, 64% are still enrolled full-time. The other respondents enrolled consistently part-time, but increased their units as time went by, with 21% maintaining 7-11 units after two semesters and none enrolling in only 1-3 units. When it comes to the class aspect, this finding is not in alignment with research indicating that low-income students have a part-time enrollment pattern (Moore & Shulock, 2009). Enrolling full-time for consecutive semesters appears to be related to low-income high-achievers' successful persistence.

**Engagement with college faculty and staff.** Survey respondents also appear to meet with their professors for office visits, a routine that is atypical for busy, commuting community college students. Thirty-eight percent said they visit professors 1-3 times during a semester; 11% indicated 4-6 times; and 8% meet with instructors 7 or more times during a semester. According to the survey, high-achieving, low-income students also meet with their counselors at percentages higher than is typical for community college students. Sixty-nine percent meet with counselors 1-3 times during a semester; 10% indicated 4 or more visits. Most importantly, perhaps, is the percentage of students who develop a specific Education Plan when they do meet with a counselor. Eighty-two percent of survey respondents did get counselor assistance in the creation of an Education

Plan. The Education Plan is a four to six semester program of study containing all the requirements that must be met for graduation or transfer.

**Coursework challenges.** In addition, as part of answering my first research question, I also sought more information about students' views about their coursework, especially any aspects they considered challenging. Students identified courses across the curriculum that they considered challenging, selected an array of challenging aspects, chose one as the most challenging, and had the option to write comments about why that was the most challenging aspect of the course. Of the 58 survey respondents, 56 wrote specific comments about what they considered to be the most challenging aspect of their courses. The three most commonly selected challenging aspects were the course material ( $n=18$ ), the professors ( $n=13$ ), and the tests ( $n=10$ ). Students' specific written comments reveal that what they find challenging about the course material and the tests revolves around issues of time, breadth of material covered, and classroom assessment techniques. Only a handful of the students explained that they were most challenged by any personal impediments to their academic success, such as language barriers, limited economic means for access to books, and lack of interest in the subject matter. Most students expressed extreme discontent with what they believe to be an over-emphasis on rote memorization even of very minor details ("What was Mozart's first job?") on tests. Students wrote about how being forced to memorize swaths of material for tests contributed to stress, test anxiety, lack of motivation to complete assignments, and lack of understanding of course content. There was a sense that timed assessments with an emphasis on memorization did not accurately measure their knowledge of the material, only the speed by which they could complete the tests. In addition, some students cited

the sense that they had to teach themselves the material, especially in online course environments.

And what makes the professor the most challenging aspect of a course? I found that the interactional space of the community college classroom, especially perceived professorial attitudes and observed behaviors, are obstacles to students' academic success. One student remarks, "She *made it difficult to learn* [emphasis added] and didn't present the material in a way that was understood by most of the class. She *didn't respond to questions* and *was very detached* from the entire course. It made it very difficult to obtain a half decent grade in the course." Another alleges,

I felt as if my professor was *not actively involved* [emphasis added] in our learning. Instead of making sure she was clear about the material, she talked more AT us. She talked to the class as if she *did not care about our learning* and couldn't wait for the class to be over. I also felt the same in the lab portion of the course. Personally, I like when my professors are actively involved in the students' learning. I even asked for outside help privately from this particular professor and she treated me the same as in lecture. She *did not do her part as a professor* in my opinion.

As these students make sense of challenging educational experiences, specific roles emerge for both student and professor. Extracting meaning from the social context of these specific teaching and learning situations, both students clearly value active engagement and expect the professor to be a willing and caring participant. The first student is disappointed in the professor's alleged unresponsiveness and detachment, factors identified here as having a negative impact on student learning. Despite previous negative experiences in both classroom and lab settings, the second student pursues help privately, a testament to the value placed on such engagement. Furthermore, the social-situatedness of sensemaking is evident here. The student demonstrates knowledge about



certain verbal cultural artifacts, such as the meaning of participation and quality teaching, and certain rituals embedded within the college community, such as the office hour visit. Like many of the other respondents, these students call attention to the considerable role of the classroom professor in student success. I have included additional salient quotations in Table 5 to support my analysis.

**Table 5:** Most "Challenging" Course Aspect: The Professor

He <i>was of no help</i> and <i>did not have any patience</i> with his online students. Because he could not open a file, instead of letting us know, he failed us right away.
When [t]he students ask him questions he <i>is very unhelpful</i> and even <i>condescending</i> at times.
My professor did not talk about the material we should have covered, and went off on tangents. Her <i>teaching style was telling the class to read the book</i> .
With a subject such as math, that is intimidating and challenging for most people, it is impossible to get through when you have a professor who <i>doesn't care if you get it</i> . Encouraging questions is one thing, then giving a <i>discouraging</i> answer like "If you don't understand I'm sorry, ask a classmate," is not helpful. <i>It wasn't until I was with a professor who truly cared about the success of his students, that I was able to learn the material and pass the class.</i>
This particular professor <i>was not organized, didn't explain material in a way that students can connect and learn</i> , and quite frankly, he made many mistakes and wouldn't realize it until a student pointed it out five minutes later. <i>Total confusion!</i>

Note. Emphasis added.

Since the foci of my second and third research questions were the students' relational ties and organizational factors mediating the students' persistence, respectively, the survey was useful for collecting details about students' perceptions about their experiences, interactions, and relationships with others within the social setting.

### **Positive and Negative Experiences on Campus**

**Placement tests.** Taking an assessment test for initial English and math course placement is one of the first tasks for a newly registered community college student. The task is often met with some trepidation. The assessment and placement system has been

scrutinized for the challenges it presents to two-year college students; most notably, students are often placed into the developmental course sequence and languish there, unable to make a successful transition to the transfer level courses needed for certificates and degrees. When asked about their assessment and placement experiences, 46 out of 58 survey respondents said they believed they were placed correctly into their English course level; 42 out of 55 respondents were satisfied with their math course placement. Most interesting is that 63% of respondents placed into transfer level English; whereas, only 44% placed into transfer level math. This finding shows some potentially problematic placement exam issues, especially with the math curriculum.

**Campus climate.** I also wanted to get some insight into how the students perceived the climate on campus and how “confident” they felt about being able to locate services and resources, such as the library, the tutoring center, and student clubs. On a Likert scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being “not at all welcoming” and 5 “extremely welcoming,” 39% rated the climate as a 4 and 30% as a 5. Such positive feelings about the campus did not match, however, the students’ confidence about some campus services. Overall, students were much more confident (with 52 or more respondents selecting “very confident” and “confident”) about locating library and admissions resources and financial aid (with 48 selecting “very confident” and “confident”). They were less confident (with 44 or fewer respondents selecting “very confident” and “confident”) about finding tutoring, clubs, events, and study groups. Of all the resources listed, finding study groups ranked last (27).

### **Participation or Non-participation in Different Social Settings**

**Study habits.** Eighty-one percent of low-income, high achievers also specified that they study at least 4 hours per week, with 52% selecting seven or more hours each week. The finding that students do not feel highly confident about locating study groups is consistent with their preferred study habits. The survey shows that students do not prefer to study with others as much as they prefer to study alone. While for this question participants could select more than one checkbox, it appears that studying alone is the most popular study routine for this student group (93%), followed by a steep drop to studying at the library (47%) and further decreases in participating in social study settings with a friend (29%) or with groups (28%). Although it appears that these students have more isolated study strategies, a healthy number (52 respondents) do participate in a variety of campus workshops hosted by outreach programs, such as EOPS, Freshman Year Experience, and the Transfer Center. Attendance at workshops points to student persistence in seeking out information that they need but does appear to be connected to or yield social interactions leading to the formation of study groups or bonds. Indeed, while 72% of respondents said they belong to social networking sites, only 8% say they use online sites for help with school “very much” and 26% indicated “sometimes.” Presumably, the students are not participating in online social groups connected to their educational life at the community college. Tellingly, 69% of the students said they do *not* belong to student clubs. Although the research reviewed in Chapter 2 points to peers’ critical roles in providing support, resources and access to social capital, peers do not seem to function in these ways for the community college students in this study.

**Experiences with Campus Faculty and Staff.** To answer my research questions about relational ties and other organizational factors, I wanted to elicit more information about students' interactions with campus faculty and staff. I asked about students' positive and negative experiences both in and out of the classroom. Of the 58 respondents, 34 said they did not have any negative experiences with faculty but 24 reported that they had. It's interesting to note that, as summarized earlier, these student respondents interact frequently with professors via the high number of office visits. This finding suggests that low-income, high-achievers persist despite some problematic experiences with their instructors. However, on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 "strongly agree," 82% of the respondents noted "strongly agree" ( $n=26$ ) and "agree" ( $n=24$ ) when asked if their professors have treated them with respect. The survey results alone do not make it entirely clear, then, the source and nature of students' reported negative experiences with faculty. As for being "treated with respect" when it comes to the counseling staff, 79% of respondents chose "strongly agree" ( $n=40$ ) and "agree" ( $n=8$ ). Unsurprisingly, then, 80% of student respondents ( $n=49$ ) reported no negative experiences with their counselors.

**Interactions with professors.** To further probe for answers to my research questions about relational ties and institutional factors at play in this low-income, high achieving student phenomenon, I collected details about interactions and relationships with others. In response to the question, "Do you have a mentor or guide who has helped you in your role as a student?" 69% of survey respondents indicated they did *not* have such an individual and 26% responded affirmatively. At first glance, this finding contradicts the research pointing to the important role of institutional agents in providing

resources and opportunities to help students successfully navigate the educational pathway (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). After all, these students are succeeding despite the many obstacles they have encountered. Yet, I found it interesting that survey respondents wrote comments about individuals they did not identify as “guides” or “mentors” but who seemed to serve as catalysts towards increasing opportunities for success. For example, 88% percent of all survey respondents chose the “professor” as an important aspect in their most “satisfying” courses. Of that 88%, 56% believe the professor to be the *most* important aspect of a “satisfying” course. These respondents further recognized the professors for certain qualities attributed to the institutional agents identified as mentors or guides by other survey respondents. Thus, despite the fact that these professors were not deemed to be “mentors,” the student respondents still took the time to highlight characteristics very similar to those of key institutional agents named by other students. Their comments appear in Table 6.

**Table 6:** Characteristics of Most "Satisfying" Professors in Student Survey

Interaction	"class interacted well with her" "entire class participated" "engaging" "interacted very well with the students and was there for your needs" "made all students feel comfortable with asking questions and to participate in class" "down to earth and fun" "easy to talk to" "nurtured a community" "respected students' opinions"
Rigor	"tough, not an easy grader...I got a lot out of it in terms of what I learned, confidence I developed, and preparation for future courses" "challenging and clear" "challenged us to step outside of the box with our ideas" "by no means a cake walk"
Motivation / Encouragement	"inspired, motivated me" "inspiring, enthusiastic" "the class subconsciously made me want to excel" "encouraged me to complete the work" "cared for the progress of his students" "friendly and kind"
Knowledge	"She was brilliant" "Intelligent" "Highly knowledgeable"

**Interactions with mentors and guides.** Of the 26% of survey respondents who did acknowledge the presence of a mentor or guide, most (75%) included specific comments about their guides. Table 7 reflects the mentor's occupation or relationship to the student as well as the characteristics or qualities the students deemed important enough to identify as playing some role in their success. As explained in the literature review, an "institutional agent" is not necessarily a member of the faculty or staff at the college, but can actually be any significant other (adult family members, teachers, counselors, school peers, etc.) playing an important role in paving the student's college

pathway. Students praise mentors who not only provide motivation and encouragement, but also who inspire them to reach the zone of excellence or high achievement.

**Table 7:** Institutional Agents: Identified Mentors and Guides in Community College

<b>Occupation or Relationship to Student</b>	<b>Qualities / Characteristics</b>
Professor	“inspires us to be the best we can be”; “door is always open and gives advice”
Professor	“keeps me focused on my goals”
High school English teacher	“very approachable, always respectful, would always listen”
Professor	“encouraged, put some amount of pressure to keep me going, doesn’t blow up in my face if I mess up”
Professor	“inspiring me to work hard”; “help picking classes, picking major”
Daughters	“encouraged me to finish my education”; “give me courage”
College graduate friend	“a good support system; “empathizes, congratulates, is actively involved in my schedule”
Counselor	“helped me a lot at the beginning of college”
Graduate student friend	“guided me through what she has learned and passed them down to me”; “feel I have an advantage to maintain my excellence”
Counselors	“helped guide me in the right direction”; “help with narrowing school choices, writing essays”
Counselor	“checking up on me to see if my work load is ok, answering questions, lent me his ear through a couple of rough emotional times”
University researchers	“helped me with study habits, time management, writing, and interview skills”; “valuable allies to me as I navigate the educational system”

Survey respondents’ comments reveal that while professors, counselors, teachers, and university researchers play supportive roles, so, to a much lesser degree, do friends and family members. The individual student interviews gave me the opportunity to further explore the nature of peer roles in community college students’ academic success.

## **Summary**

Overall, the survey data pointed toward future areas to probe during the semi-structured interviews for more in depth answers to my research questions. Low-income high-achievers cite not only economic obstacles but also some organizational obstacles to their success, especially in the realm of practices within the community college's teaching and learning environments. The survey indicates isolated study routines but strategies for success that include purposeful interaction with institutional agents, including relationship bonds.

In the next chapter, I include a summary, analysis and discussion of the community college counselor interview data.



## CHAPTER 5: Perspectives of Community College Counselors

### Introduction

This chapter describes and analyzes interview data collected of three institutional representatives, community college counselors from the same study site. Their perspectives can provide more information about the range of organizational factors that mediate the relationship between the academic experiences of high-achieving, disadvantaged two-year college students and their scholastic success, a specific aim of this study.

I analyze the counselors' perspectives about the college's student demographics, the students' preparation for college, and obstacles to their academic success. These perceptions about the students reveal some of the attitudes and beliefs present within the socio-cultural environment of the college. Comparing the institutional representatives' opinions to those of the students gets me closer to the whole story about identities, cultural influences and success strategies and is helpful for more fully answering my first research question. Although my first research question focuses on the students' sensemaking about opportunities and obstacles encountered at the community college, I compare the surveyed students' perspectives and counselors' perspectives in order to get a clearer picture of the setting from multiple perspectives.

I also describe the counselors' views regarding specific institutional practices, such as counseling, teaching, and assessment. This information is valuable for further responding to my second research question which focuses on the relationships, interactions and roles individuals play in the community college setting. Moreover, the counselors' perceptions about such organizational practices can inform my understanding

of both obstacles and interventions students might encounter along their educational pathway.

In addition, I provide a précis of the counselors' judgments about why some students do not meet their academic goals and which reforms they believe are needed to foster greater student success. Such points of view about empowering and disempowering campus practices and how they affect student achievement can engender a more fully nuanced response to my third research question, which examines the range of organizational factors mediating students' experiences and their successful persistence within this setting.

Furthermore, I interrogate the data more fully via a comparative analysis of details provided by the counselors and the responses collected in the student survey data. Common to both data sets are revelations about problematic placement and developmental course issues. Engagement with institutional representatives as a key factor in student success is also a similarity. Counselors voice strong support for community-building student support programs, such as the Extended Opportunity Program Services (EOPS) and Freshman Year Experience (FYE). Providing additional data on campus climate, the counselors are no holds barred when it comes to holding the institution accountable for what they perceive to be a lack of commitment to the needs of underrepresented students. The subsequent analysis is organized around major themes mined from the counselor interview data.

### **Counselor Perspectives about Student Class and Preparation for College**

When asked to describe the campus, all three counselors, Luke, Savannah, and Adam (all names are pseudonyms) depicted the study site as similar to most California

community colleges in that there is a wide range of ethnicities, ages, and levels of preparation for college. Two of the counselors (Luke and Savannah, respectively) did distinguish the campus from others stating it was “not as urban” and “not historically poor. Historically poor is second, third, generation welfare. Many of my students are out of work or divorced, working poor.” These perceptions of higher economic class standing intersect with their beliefs about the obstacles students must contend with in order to succeed. Luke believes the students “are higher functioning” than those coming from the “inner city,” where he once worked and felt he was less of a community college counselor and more of a “counselor combination social worker.” Indeed, Luke describes “inner city” students as having “real needs” whereas many of the study site’s students are “AP, homeschooled.” Likewise, Savannah displays a similar attitude toward the students’ higher class and its supposed connection to their preparation for college. She claims, “A lot have grown up with an entitlement attitude; they’ve had mommy and daddy do everything for them.”

Although Adam did not make such an overt connection between economic class and the students’ differing needs for support, he did discuss the changing image of the community college among well-prepared students from neighboring high school districts. Adam thinks the campus had a “stigma” and was viewed as a place for “vocational education” until the recession and budget cuts caused a shift in attitude among the area’s university bound high school students. “If your high school is looking much better than your community college, your high school has theaters and nice, cushioned tracks, students wondered if they should be going here. But . . . we started becoming a viable option. . . . They have to come here. . . it’s [about] where can I get my classes.”

Despite expressing such views about class and preparation for college, all three counselors describe a lack of preparation among many students in very specific areas, namely math and English. For Adam, “We have two groups of freshmen.” Unlike the university bound high school graduate he first describes, he sees the “traditional community college student” as an individual who “never got preparation in high school” and whose lack of preparation is due to a school system in which students do not learn basic skills but are kept “moving forward” nonetheless. Luke is “disappointed in the writing levels” in the college success course he teaches and Savannah observes that “they can’t read; they can’t do basic math. They are not socially prepared for college.” Thus, from the counselors’ perspective, community college students at this campus are a hodgepodge mix of skills and abilities. For them, class is the most salient variable when it comes to students’ preparation for college.

Given this perception that the strengths and needs of the student population vary, the counselors indicate that the factors contributing to student success are dependent on the particular needs of learners, especially their economic backgrounds, their social maturation levels, and prior educational history. When this finding is contrasted to the student survey data, counselors’ perspectives appear to diverge sharply from the students’ views. As shown in Chapter 4, when students comment about coursework challenges, they shift attention outward toward perceived negative professorial attitudes, behaviors and classroom assessment techniques. Rather than commenting on their own prior academic or social preparation for college, most students named specific positive and negative interactions within the college’s social world as important contributions or impediments to their success. All survey respondents were low-income, yet, unlike the

counselors, only a handful chose economic constraints as the most challenging aspect of taking college courses. It seems that the counselors' appraisals of the students, akin to logical empiricism, attempt to "measure" certain aspects the individual students bring to their college-going experience. College success depends in part, then, on how much maturity, how much wealth, or how much academic training the students possess before they enter the classroom door. The students, however, point their fingers not at "measurements" but at interactions within the complex social web of the community college. To further extend the analogy, I liken the students to interpretivists, who emphasize the cultural setting and the relationships they must negotiate while attempting to persist in college.

### **Languishing in Basic Skills Education**

Despite survey results showing a majority of students believe they were placed correctly into their initial math and English course placements, all three counselors gave detailed evaluations of what they see as a flawed assessment process. Luke believes "Assessment is key. In assessment, it's our job to get it right." He worries about forcing students to enroll in so many developmental classes—"Can't we do something else?" Luke is especially concerned about the standardized math assessment/placement system. He explains that many high school students who pass Calculus with an A are assessed by the computerized exam into levels as low as Pre-Algebra. He advises such students to take the challenge exam so their initial placement can be corrected. The system allows students to enroll in the math class they believe they should take, pending the results of the challenge exam. However, upon failing the challenge exam, the student is disenrolled from the class and then sent to a math class possibly five levels down from

where he should truly be based on success in math courses taken in high school. He has observed that these students typically ace the lower levels but unfortunately receive no college credit for these pre-college level math courses. He calls this a failure to provide the “proper support for students to be successful” and further asserts that “the test shouldn’t be a way of putting you somewhere and making you stay there.”

Savannah similarly disparages math assessment practices, describing them as “our convoluted going-through-the-hoops system.” She declares math students should simply “take what they want.” Revealing of her concern about the failure of the assessment system, she cited that 70% of students “qualify for basic skills out of assessment.” She further describes both the Basic Skills and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs as “too long,” contributing to student discouragement and lack of retention.

Adam agrees that the math assessment process “needs to be improved” and cites that “even students who completed Calculus in high school have to go through two hurdles just to get back to that level of mathematics.” He reiterates, “The system definitely, definitely needs to be worked on.” Adam sees problems with the English placement system as well. If a student has taken English courses outside of the district, including in another state, the courses are evaluated by the Evaluations office. When evaluators do not accept these courses as equivalent to the district’s courses, the students are forced to go back and complete basic skills or freshman composition courses they have already taken and that “even our local universities would have accepted.” According to Adam, although students have the option of challenging the evaluator’s

decision by petitioning the department chair, students must be aware of that option and take the initiative in pursuing the challenge.

Luke recommends improving the current assessment system by integrating multiple measures, investing more time with each individual student to determine proper placement, and allowing counselors more discretion in placing students. Counselors can assist further by intervening in correcting initial placements. If the placement exam puts a student into the basic skills track, counselors can take more time with the student to see whether the placement is truly appropriate. He also advocates for placing students in more challenging classes.

The flawed assessment and placement system described by the counselors has been the focus of some attention by researchers (Offenstein & Shulock, 2010; Brown & Niemi, 2007). Because of open access admissions policies, the California community colleges have long been challenged by enrolling large numbers of underprepared students. Research has shown that the vast majority of California community college students place into remedial math and English courses and languish there, never reaching the transfer level courses they need to receive credit for transfer to a California State University or University of California campus (Moore, Shulock, & Offenstein, 2009). When students complete a multitude of remedial/developmental courses and actually manage to transfer, Melguizo, Hagedorn, and Cypers (2008) show that after five years at the community college, students received credit for only one year's worth of college-level classes. Although the counselors did not refer to any specific data sets, using only anecdotal evidence based on their years of work in the district, their perspectives are supported by the research. Indeed, for math in particular, "The likelihood of taking a

transfer level math course after starting in a basic level math course is only 10%” (Brown & Niemi, 2007, p. 2). Research also shows that when students take credit-bearing courses despite being deemed “ineligible” or “underprepared” by the placement exams, they perform relatively well; this situation indicates problematic access, equity and resource management issues (Brown & Niemi, 2007, p. 6).

The finding that counselors believe assessment and placement services are doing the students a great disservice highlights another aspect of the study site’s cultural setting. The counselors portray an assessment/placement system which produces data used to boost numbers in the remedial track, dashing students’ efforts at successful completion and transfer. Missing from the picture is the mention of any institution-directed and meaningful analysis of the data’s quality or of any organizational commitment to efforts to get the data needed to make more informed decisions. Given the importance of the placement exam in determining a student’s probable educational achievement outcome, this lack of a “culture of inquiry” (Dowd, 2005) is worth further examination. Of notable concern as well is the large number of Black and Latino(a) students who place into remedial/developmental courses (Melguizo, Hagedorn, & Cypers, 2008). Although the California Basic Skills Initiative (CBSI) has infused over 100 million dollars in the last few years to “strengthen the delivery of basic skills courses,” researchers call for an evaluation of CBSI in order to determine whether such support has resulted in student success (Melguizo, Bos, & Prather, 2011, p. 181).

Correct assessment and placement seem to matter when it comes to the surveyed high-achievers in this study. As summarized in Chapter 4, 75% of respondents believe they were placed correctly into English and 69% felt that way about their math



placement. However, in support of the counselors' views and the above-cited research, of the 12 high-achievers who felt they had not been placed into an English class correctly, all but one believe *higher* rather than lower placement would have been a more accurate assessment of their skills. Likewise, of the 13 dissatisfied with their initial math placement, nine out of 13 believe they should have been placed into a *higher* course. Additionally, as pointed out in Chapter 4, 63% of survey respondents landed in transfer level English, but only 44% obtained a transfer level math placement. These data partially corroborate the counselors' claims about problems with the math placement system in particular.

### **Institutional Efforts to Bolster Student Success**

Luke, Savannah and Adam cite counseling, outreach and other support services as paramount factors that contribute to student success. When asked to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the counseling department, their position was unanimous. Savannah, whose tenure as a counselor spans several decades, exclaims that she would "feel comfortable telling students to go see any of our counselors . . . our current group is excellent." Echoing her sentiment, Luke, a twenty-nine year veteran, believes the counselor role includes skills in critical thinking and as cooperative team members but also individuals who must really "care about people" and must "help students be prepared for success in college." To further support student success, Luke underscores the important role counselors play in helping students navigate the transition from high school level work where they were able to "ace every class without doing homework" to the rigor of college courses.

Adam, too, believes in providing assistance to students who need to make the transition to the rigor of college coursework. He cites outreach efforts that have enabled counselors to visit high schools and “plant seeds” as well as programs like the Freshman Year Experience (FYE) where students get face-to-face contact with support staff he says are intent on providing the kind of structure that can help students resist feeling overwhelmed. The only department “weakness” cited by all of the counselors was the budget cuts resulting in limited staffing and limited counselor availability to students.

Prompted to talk about the important people and programs that contribute to student success, Luke’s comments centered on existing programs and practices he thinks remove impediments to student success. According to Luke, two key programs provide the resources and interventions students need to succeed. The Extended Opportunity Program Services (EOPS) “graduates people at higher numbers than anybody else” in part he believes because they “establish a campus sense of community. Make people feel they should be there.” Freshman Year Experience (FYE) provides priority enrollment, mandatory enrollment in a college success and study skills course, and linked courses in reading, writing and math. Although they do not yet have any data to analyze, Luke anticipates the data will show FYE students will be more successful than others because of these coordinated student service and instructional efforts at building a community. Noting the presence of new buildings on campus, Luke is hopeful that students will stay longer, “have a sense of belonging, especially students of color.” Previous studies at both community colleges and universities reiterate enhanced retention and persistence rates for students who participate in freshman year experience courses and orientations (Hawley & Harris, 2006; Sidle & McReynolds, 1999). At one community college, faculty, staff and

students participate in monitoring students' progress at specific checkpoints (15, 30 and 45 credits) as a means of providing greater institutional support and preventing withdrawal from the institution (Hawley & Harris, 2006).

Perhaps because of her longtime role as a director of EOPS, Savannah is very knowledgeable and most concerned about the impact of budgetary cuts on the programs and services she believes are essential to student success. At the time of the interview, the fate of California's Proposition 30, a statewide sales and income tax increase created in part to prevent planned spending reductions to education, was not yet known. Although the measure passed in November 2012, it is not yet known what the specific gains will be for the California community colleges. Savannah worries that the state will cut resources for the most economically disadvantaged students, a perceived shift in thinking about the mission of the community college from supporting as equally as possible a wide range of goals (taking a few classes for a promotion; enrichment; vocational training; and transfer) to an emphasis on improving the transfer rate.

Savannah celebrates the success of EOPS, a program in which students "have just about double the persistence rate compared to the general population." During the interview, she proudly mentioned that she keeps a graph displaying that persistence rate on her office wall. She credits EOPS interventions in many areas of the students' lives as key in fostering student success. EOPS students receive priority enrollment by state law. Despite a 40% reduction in her budget, Savannah was still able to assist EOPS students with small stipends for books, supplies, parking, and public transportation. Periodically, she and other counselors send out an email request to the entire campus to help stock the

EOPS pantry, a source of food for EOPS students, the most economically disadvantaged students on campus.

Most of Savannah's comments circle around interactions with students and attitudes toward them that she deems important for student success. "We really think the most important thing is the contact." Savannah feels that frequent interaction and communication with EOPS students are key to their persistence. EOPS requires students to meet with a counselor at least three times during a semester, assigns projects in which students get familiar with different campus services (tutoring, the child development center, etc.) and follows up in myriad ways (email, postcard, phone calls) with students who miss appointments.

There are certain attitudes Savannah resolutely maintains work to cement student success. Savannah explains that in EOPS, "We try to create an environment of caring." EOPS is a place where students feel comfortable asking questions, where the staff knows students by name. "I think it's the personal touch . . . sometimes just a little word of encouragement." Savannah is adamant about cultivating such attitudes among her staff. She underscores the importance of "treat[ing] others like human beings" and says she promotes training of career advisers and peer role models (EOPS students who work in the office) in developing courteous and encouraging attitudes toward the students.

It's not surprising that Savannah would emphasize, "respect is the big word." She once told an EOPS student focus group that she had acquired additional funding for book stipends. She made the students an offer: "I can give you all \$25 more on your book account or I could give 15 new students book accounts. What do you prefer?"

“Give it to somebody else,” they said. Savannah declares, “These kids have nothing. And they share.”

Just like Luke, Adam highlights FYE as “the best thing” for promoting student success. Many of his comments revolve around the need to educate incoming students about the world of higher education. FYE has a student ambassador component offering new students the benefit of guidance from someone who had once been in their shoes. Adam believes, “You can’t even measure what they do.” He says he has heard students talk about how valuable it is to know someone will be there they can talk to, whether it is in one of the instructional labs or a program office.

One of the reasons students do not persist, according to Adam, is the lack of support, especially not having personal contact with someone at the college. Adam describes how often new students miscalculate the time commitment involved in college. Underrepresented and low-income students miss seeing “the big picture” and do not succeed because they “think they have to be full-time to get financial aid.” A part-time schedule with some financial aid is a better pathway for some students, Adam suggests. Thwarting students’ success is their own lack of clear goals and failure to understand the educational system overall.

### **Concerns about Campus Climate and Commitment to Diversity**

Counselors express frank observations about perceived racial tensions on campus. Luke firmly believes that there is one noticeable problem area within the faculty ranks—the lack of diversity. “I’m a white person. I’m not trying to slam my own people. But you can’t tell me that there’s no math professors of color out here. You can’t tell me people of color don’t know math because they do at other schools. How can you have an

entirely white department?” He says that he learned from his work on counseling intervention teams that some faculty “have preconceived ideas about the students” and they are clearly more comfortable “around the students who look like [them].” He observes that sometimes faculty fear students because of their physical appearance, citing negative reactions to tattoos, for instance. He told a story about a student whose paper would have been considered “great” at a local, urban and diverse community college but at this college “some faculty wonder if they should be afraid” because the paper had some “off-color” content. For the college to succeed in supporting students, he emphasizes “caring” not just from counselors but from teachers as well: “Teachers should care about you. We need caring teachers but with the rigor of college.” Counselors are also teaching faculty in college success courses and other disciplines in which they hold graduate degrees. Although Savannah, in her role as a Faculty Evaluation Coordinator, does believe that the “vast majority of our *contract* teachers” are respected and get “decent marks,” the college relies primarily on adjunct teachers, who do not have much job security and as “freeway flyers” travel to multiple assignments on different campuses. As both a counselor and a Psychology professor, Luke refers to the “old guard” and the “new guard” among the teaching ranks. The new differs from the old in that the former are seen as more student-centered, “passionate” instructors who strive to make the classroom experience “exciting” because “they see teaching as a privilege.” For Adam, only “students who take the initiative to communicate with their instructors” get the needed support from their professors.

Although Savannah’s dedication to EOPS students is quite evident, she observes that outside of the EOPS office is another matter entirely. While she does believe there

are many individuals across departments working to improve student success, she claims that the campus does not have “much of a commitment to low income students or people of color.” With a smile and in a self-deprecating tone, Savannah explains that some students “listen to Mariah a lot more” because Mariah, a counselor, is a woman of color and serves as a role model for underrepresented students. Savannah sees her own role differently: “I’m an old white lady. I’m not a role model. I work to empower others to be the role models.”

Campus life is one organizational factor Adam thinks could be improved to advance student success. He recounts how discouraging it seems when the campus allots only two hundred dollars a year for Diversity Committee activities. He considers how other colleges get much more funding for diversity-themed activities that promote inclusion and a positive campus climate. Adam also emphasized relational ties as important aspects of campus life. He notes, “Individuals go outside of themselves to assist students. I’ve seen it at the administrator, faculty, staff level. I’ve seen our groundskeepers go out and provide some kind of support. People in our cafeteria create bonds and make people feel comfortable. You give them that first initial momentum.” Although he has seen these interactions as positive aspects of campus life, Adam also feels “there’s still a power that be that keeps everyone separate.” He is aware of how campus politics and the rumor mill among the faculty, situations in which dissension exists between different factions (senators, chairs, administrators, etc.) function in destructive ways on campus and interfere with the positive energy engendered by so many others across the college. He characterizes himself as one of those “front line soldiers” who is “trying to better my surroundings and all I control.” He reiterates that

the campus can help students achieve their goals if there were more people “who would genuinely go above and beyond.”

As summarized in Chapter 4, low-income, high-achievers identified purposeful interaction with institutional agents as one strategy for success. The counselor-student and teacher-student interactions described by the counselors similarly revolve around a core set of faculty characteristics students say they need to succeed. These include engaged, passionate and caring individuals who actively participate in building bonds or relationships with students. Students and counselors both note the value of mentorship for targeted forms of assistance, including goal-setting, course selection, and general navigation of the college.

### **Summary of Patterns and Themes in Community College Counselor Data**

In sum, the community college counselor data show that while students across the campus have wide-ranging needs, students’ sensemaking about the opportunities and obstacles they encounter at the college can be affected by their lack of economic and social capital. For low-income and underrepresented students without mentors or guides, the lack of knowledge about the educational system, especially placement assessment and challenge practices, can doom them to a prolonged sentence within a basic skills prison, a place from which there is rarely an escape. Low-income students who qualify and obtain program services from EOPS and FYE benefit via interaction opportunities with peer mentors or institutional agents who project an attitude of commitment to the needs of disadvantaged students. Creating community or a sense of belonging is identified as a key intervention strategy for student success. The range of organizational factors that mediate the relationship between the academic experiences of the college’s students and



their successful persistence includes disempowering assessment and teaching practices, as well as empowering bond-formation experiences in and out of the classroom. All three counselors suggest a need to scrutinize the plight of underrepresented students, especially forms of support other than financial, such as those that address social and personal needs.

In comparing the community counselor data to the student survey data, three common themes emerge as answers to my research questions. First, both data sets suggest that frequent communication with a caring institutional agent plays a role in students' persistence. High-achievers seek out quality interactions with more knowledgeable others who respect and encourage them. Second, intervention by an experienced college student/peer mentor or by an institutional representative is valuable when such an individual assists students in setting specific goals and remaining focused. Intervention when offered at the *beginning* of the college experience is mentioned as important in both data sets. Early intervention appears to be especially important for certain populations. As explained in Chapter 2, for underrepresented students, the quality of their interactions with faculty and staff is strongly related to their persistence (Gardenshire-Crooks et al., 2010). Both data sets show that despite encountering some negative experiences on campus, positive relationships serve to inspire, give confidence, and contribute greatly to students' persistence. And, third, while the presence of institutional agents is an empowering organizational factor mediating students' academic experiences and their successful persistence, disempowering organizational factors appear to center on assessment/placement practices and perceived professorial attitudes and behaviors. While no student survey respondents commented about cultural

sensitivity and diversity issues, all the counselors believe more attention must be paid to underrepresented populations.

In Chapter 6, community college student interviewees take center stage. Their voices, in the form of both poetry and narrative, represent four different experience patterns: The Immigrant Story; The Second Chance; Leaving a Legacy and Yes, I Can. Similarities, differences and co-occurrences among the narratives help guide the subsequent phenomenological and constant comparison/grounded analysis.

## CHAPTER 6: Student Narratives: Dreaming of an Education

### Introduction

Chapter 6 provides a descriptive overview and analysis of student interview data. To present findings from the 25 individual, semi-structured interviews conducted for this study, I organize the data around four major themes present across the interview transcripts. A linguistic analysis of the interview transcripts as narratives (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) yielded the following overarching themes across the collective: 1) The Immigrant Story; 2) The Second Chance; 3) Leaving a Legacy and 4) Yes, I Can. By paying close attention to the social, cultural and institutional influences on the students' college-going experience, I identify and contextualize the common experiences of each of the four categories of high-achieving, low-income community college students.

To display my findings, each of the four major patterns is introduced via a hallmark transcript poem I wrote. The transcript as poem is a valuable method for emphasizing the individual's "lived experience" and "the core of the case" (Richardson, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This technique is also rooted in respect for the uniqueness of individual experiences and for the presence of multiple knowledges and multiple truths. Following the model presented by Richardson (1992), I use *only* the students' own words, convey as closely as possible the students' moods and tone of voice, and apply some literary devices (repetition, meter, rhyme, contrast) to highlight important choices the students made as active participants within specific contexts.

Furthermore, my analysis is extended by detecting students' impressions about the knowledges and skills they bring to their community college experience, including any forms of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). I include students' observations

about the effects of class, gender, and race on their successful persistence within this social setting.

The next section of Chapter 6 introduces each of the four major themes found in the interview data. In addition to a qualitative analysis of the interviews, the transcripts were constructed into four “found” poems which exemplify the major themes of the students’ narratives of success. The first poem, “Miguel’s Life Narrative,” represents the theme, The Immigrant Story. Emblematic of the theme entitled The Second Chance is a poem called “Time for Whitney.” “Curtis’ Last Chance” is the third poem and introduces the thematic strand, Leaving a Legacy. The concluding poem, “Joshua: It comes from within” embodies the final theme, Yes, I Can. Table 3 in Chapter 3 presents all student interviewees’ pseudonyms, ages, gender, and self-identified race/ethnicity. Identifying characteristics from Table 3 are re-inserted and interwoven throughout this chapter where appropriate for purposes of clarity and organization.

### **Hallmark Poem for The Immigrant Story: “Miguel’s Life Narrative”**

#### **“Miguel’s Life Narrative”**

**i**

I was born in a little village,  
in the middle of a jungle in Mexico.  
My mom gave me up for adoption.

Adoptive parents took me to Guadalajara  
a really good education there, a private, Catholic school.  
My stepmother died.  
And my stepfather didn’t have enough money to keep paying for it.

So I went to a government junior high and I got a scholarship to be an air traffic controller.

*(They make less than the people that pick onions in the US.)*

My father got sick.  
And I couldn’t pay for the private hospital where he was so I decided to immigrate.

*(I picked onions in the fields for a while, got a job in a restaurant.)*

Then I got my legal papers.

I went to a community college and in two and a half years I got an Associate's degree.  
And joined the army.

*(I got to tell you the truth. I joined the army because the financial aid did not come through to go to Tempe or to UC.)*

GI Bill, very little money

I got a job picking onions.

*(Yeah, education is forever. This has been my vision my whole life.)*

I got a job in a restaurant.

*(It was difficult to live.)*

I got a job as a peer tutor.

*(It was difficult to live.)*

I got a job assembling angioplastic catheters for patients of the heart.

*(The company moved production to Tijuana and didn't want to pay me the same money.)*

I got a job driving trucks.

*(15 October 2008, I rolled over with one of the trailers in a winter storm in Montana.)*

The company fired me.

*(No other trucking companies wanted to hire me anymore.)*

## ii

Border patrol arrested me.

*I have always been a good reader.*

None of the army recruiters wanted to take me because I was not a legal resident.

*I can remember most of what I read.*

Amnesty came out. I was a little afraid I would not have the skills I needed.

*I did the assessment and placed really well in math and English. Didn't have to take any ESL classes.*

People assume I am of European descent. Before they hear me speak. When they hear that accent, they become closed, they don't want to keep that communication open anymore.

*I have a Mexican name but my appearance is very white because my biological father was from Spain.*

Sometimes people don't like you for some reason and it's not based on race. Sometimes it's obvious it's because of race.

At Willow Creek Community College two professors expected me to have A's and know more than the other students. Because I was Hispanic. One English professor constantly picked on me.

*I enjoy learning. To me taking a class is fun. When I succeed, it's a good feeling.*

I filed a complaint.  
 President of the school  
 Director of counselors  
 Director of admissions  
 Involved.  
 Council reviewed.

*I set a precedent. Hope it will help other students who come after me.  
 It's an extra effort I have to do.*

### iii

I was in England before I emigrated to the United States  
 Father helped me take a one month class in London.  
 I tripped and fell.  
 Teacher called ambulance  
 X-rays, help, no charge

*(I wasn't even a legal citizen there. Why is it not that way in the US?)*

Shakespeare class at Willow Creek Community College  
 Read a lot, challenging  
 Every single class was really good  
 Talent of the professor, always willing to talk,  
 Would find him in the afternoon  
 extending the class.

*(If you don't like school, you haven't found the right teachers.)*

EOPS counselors

Reached out  
 In the community, at restaurants  
 Known for helping students who don't have means.  
 They really showed empathy.

*(Here it's like they don't care. There is no money, so they don't encourage. Don't have a vocation to help).*

**iv**

Now  
 I'm 53 years old.  
 I come from a very poor family.  
 I don't think I'm going to win the lottery, have my own business.  
*But I think I can get an education.*

Worried about being out of place  
 Worried about my abilities to take all this on my own.  
*Counselors were great. Helped me gain a little more confidence. Pointed me to the right way, what I had to do. AA from Willow Creek was general education for transfer to university but I never went to university. Now I enrolled again and I already see results. New computer skills, a promotion at work. A new certificate soon. I have a great deal of confidence in counselors.*

The cost of the school is the biggest hurdle to overcome.  
*Education gives you a way of thinking that helps you interact better. You can defend your rights better. Do a better job. It doesn't matter what you do, education will help make it better.*

Online instructors do not promote study groups.  
*Professor Rose made himself available. Professors should make themselves available. I think college professors are wise.*

Poor people  
 usually don't  
 have good educational experiences in the past  
 Are so afraid  
 of going to school.  
*Encouragement. If faculty or staff, first time someone contacts them, make them feel they will succeed. They need to feel they have support.*

I work full-time.  
 Option to study online prompted me to go back to school.  
 There is no one catching you if you are doing wrong.  
 Didn't know how to use Blackboard.

Couldn't understand some of the logic behind the books.

*The people in the Learning Center, the LC, are great! They have a vocation to do what they do. Some of the guys there helped me.*

The tutor in the LC is my only friend. Hard to connect when you don't know people.

*Sixteen years ago, I got a job as a peer tutor. Because I too had trouble once. It was not the money that motivated me to help.*

*I feel the people who are willing to help, it's because, they want to give back.*

It's a cold environment. Maybe it's because I'm older now?

*Have already convinced 3 people at work to go to classes*

*One didn't know how to enroll on the Internet*

*I helped her get her ID number.*

*Society*

*With better educated citizens*

*Will be more prosperous*

*Lots of countries, where they don't have to pay for their education*

*When they graduate, they contribute back.*

*Education will benefit their lives.*

## **Findings and Discussion of The Immigrant Story**

Common to many of the student narratives in this study, Miguel's immigrant story contains a plethora of observations about navigating community college life. Nine of the 25 students gave detailed narratives about their immigration to America and shared their perspectives about how their immigration status intersected with their experiences as community college students. The countries of origin include Nazreen from Afghanistan; William from Guatemala; Kahil from Iraq; Delilah, Luisa, Miguel and Tina from Mexico and the United States; Lian from Taiwan, and Angelina from the Ukraine. The immigrant identity can be described as an interaction between the attitudes, values and beliefs of immigrants and the responses received from others within their new



communities. A grounded, constant comparison of immigrant transcript narratives revealed several common patterns.

**Poverty.** Poverty and hardships across generations is a shared theme.

Undergirding this theme is the sense that through the ideals of hard work and education, self-realization and wider, societal improvement can be attained. The hallmark poem introducing this section presents the perils of poverty and its pernicious consequences on individuals like Miguel, a 53-year-old Mexican immigrant who clearly values education. Similarly, Angelina, who is in her twenties and identifies as Jewish, describes the desire to escape oppressive conditions in the Ukraine, where “if you are born poor, you are going to remain poor,” replaced by a life as an American college student characterized by “that feeling of constant financial pressure” and “of always being in financial need.” Although Angelina has developed a host of coping mechanisms (e.g. borrowing a car, always bringing lunch from home, renting instead of buying books), she emphasizes that no matter how limited your expenses are, “it’s still a struggle.” Appendix F contains a found poem inspired by Angelina’s narrative.

Luisa was ten years old when her family brought her to the United States from Mexico. Now twenty-one, she echoes Angelina’s sentiment, “I don’t think people who haven’t gone through money hardships, they don’t really understand what it really means to be an immigrant, to work minimum wage jobs.” Likewise, Tina, also Mexican-American and in her twenties, describes her poverty as a motivating factor in pursuing her education: “I want to finish my career because I want to be able to support my parents when they are older. . . . They just live in an apartment. They don’t have the money to buy anything.” Securing her financial future through education is also important to Tina

because of her family history. “My mom was raised by a single parent in Mexico City. It was really hard for my grandma to raise three girls on her own, so she would always tell them to get a good education because they need to go to college in case a man ever left them.” For Tina, then, escaping poverty through education is also a means for escaping a gendered form of oppression. The statistical trend toward greater educational achievement among Latinas rooted in the pursuit of equality has been well-documented (Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Bean & Tienda, 1987; Fine & Weiss, 1998; Smith, 2002; Valenzuela, 1993).

**Institutional agents and influential others.** Students narrate details about relationships with influential others, individuals playing positive, intervening roles in their success stories, both within and without the institution. A Guatemalan-American, William, who manages full-time work with the military and full-time school, believes he “would not be here in this college if it wasn’t for my wife pushing me.” He cites a high school teacher who “always pushed us to strive for the best, . . . not to go to dances, not to go to parties, take care of what you need to take care of” and a college counselor who gave him clear and vital information about a continuous enrollment program with a local university. Brought to the United States from Afghanistan when she was only three years old, Nazreen’s peer and familial networks include friends and brothers who have already attended community colleges so she “knew how to pick [her] classes.”

Delilah, who is Mexican-American and in her early twenties, credits “the relationships I had with teachers” as instrumental in deciding to go to college. “They made the time to get to know me as a person. I wasn’t just another student in their classroom. . . . They really could see what my passions were and they encouraged me.”

Likewise, Delilah refers to having similar relationships with some of her college professors, individuals who demonstrate “genuine care” and “want to make sure you succeed.”

The institutional agents in the students’ lives appear to play an important role in college students’ success even if the initial interaction occurred years earlier. Like William, Luisa recalls,

I went back to see my senior English teacher from high school. My friend said let’s go talk to him because we liked him. [The teacher] said that even though my grade was not the best in the class I was one of the best students in the class. Hearing that made me think maybe others, professors at the college, think of me like that, too. That’s one of the things that made me stay and try a little bit harder.

Just as Miguel’s poem includes details about counselors “who really showed empathy,” Kahil is in his forties and is an immigrant from Iraq. He credits his EOPS counselor for helping him cope with financial pressures by helping him get a job on campus, a job he appreciates because of the opportunity to enrich his network of connections with others: “I got the chance to know instructors, to know who is working here, being introduced to the staff, to the faculty, a good position.” Lian, in her early twenties, moved to the United States from Taiwan when she was finishing fifth grade. She says in the community college, “you find yourself by yourself alone a lot of the time.” She seeks to “overcome” the stress of isolation by interacting with older students: “I met a lot of students that are a lot older than me and they would tell me about their work experience and life interactions they had and . . . I think I might do that or if I run into this problem, this is what I’ll do about it.”

**Aspirational and familial capital.** Co-occurring across the student interviewee collective is the presence of multiple stressors (personal, academic and financial), as well as multiple strategies for contending with those stressors, such as maintaining high aspirations, a sense of commitment to their families or communities, and critical support from faculty, peer and other contacts for developing coping mechanisms to combat stressful situations. Delilah is the oldest and first to go to college in her family. She speaks of her Mexican background as a major influence in her college going experience. “I am just one person, just one Hispanic person but that paves the way for others. Where I grew up is predominantly Hispanic . . . I want to set the way for others from my community to see that college is attainable.” Luisa hopes her success will “show [my] brother he can do it, too.” And Nazreen says, “I strive more here in America because in Afghanistan they don’t allow women to have an education. It makes me want to do better.” Many of these abilities, knowledges and skills are acknowledged as forms of cultural wealth possessed by marginalized groups (Yosso, 2005).

**Role of classroom faculty.** Of all the institutional impediments or contributors to their success, the role of the classroom professor, especially perceived attitudes and behaviors, both positive and negative, looms large throughout the collective.

Angelina praises an “amazing English professor” who was “willing to communicate” and a Biology professor with whom she “kept a good relationship” as instrumental in encouraging her to get more involved on campus. Because of the professors’ involvement, she learned about scholarship opportunities, joined the Honors Program, and became an officer in a student club.

Similarly, Delilah expresses gratitude for the many positive interactions she has had with professors, affirming that “it makes everything worth it.” However, she describes some disappointing experiences in the classroom.

I knew the curriculum. I studied the curriculum. But the way she taught the class was just, it was just horrible. . . . She talked to the class instead of with the class. She would rarely stop for questions. Lots of hands raised and she wouldn't acknowledge them. She would go through the curriculum really quickly and just refer us back to the page, never gave us the specific help we needed. I went to her office hours and she just did not care to help me. I felt really frustrated. I didn't know what to do.

Nazreen also cites positive interactions with a couple of professors. She recognizes the support she has received from a writing instructor who motivates her to excel and an anthropology professor with whom she is comfortable enough to share personal struggles. However, one negative incident stands out in her academic life. “I was wearing a hijab and my friend was wearing a hijab. And when I got my grade it was lower than hers and I always did better. I talked to [the Biology professor] and said I think you mixed me up with my friend. He would get us confused in class returning papers. I emailed him about the grade and he said that is not your decision to make.”

Although Nazreen's attempt to resolve the issue with her professor directly was unsuccessful, she did not pursue the matter further. Moreover, Nazreen spoke about valuing the diversity on campus and her sense that her peers were less judgmental about “how people dress” than those she knew in high school. However, she admits that she does not “interact much” with her peers. Not filing a complaint about this hijab incident and infrequent interaction with others on campus indicate perhaps that Nazreen experiences isolation connected to her veiling practice. Such a negative experience is not uncommon for Muslim students who choose to veil or wear a hijab. Studying the

perceptions of women who veiled on a large Midwestern college campus, Cole and Ahmadi (2003) report the alienation from the campus community the women experience when they encounter non-Muslims who stereotype them as oppressed, subordinated females. Describing veiling as a religious and familial obligation, not a cultural practice, many women, after several negative experiences they attribute to wearing the hijab (the failure to get hired, social and academic isolation, discrimination, etc.) decide to stop the practice. Certainly, the negative classroom incident demonstrates the presence of a conflict that is a part of Nazreen's college-going experience. Although her familial capital sustains her while in school, the hijab, representative of family traditions and religious beliefs, is implicated in unsupportive, isolating campus experiences.

**Counter-narratives.** There are notable differences among the immigrant narratives as well. Not all of the students mention structural factors mediating the relationship between their academic experiences and successful persistence. Interestingly, for *all* five of the Latino(a) students in this sample, *cuentos* about experiencing the world as immigrants also involve responding to situations of racism and discrimination and are sources of experiential knowledge and resistant capital (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) connected to their persistence.

Luisa, speaking through tears throughout the interview, tells a story of challenging oppression on campus: "I've run into students who have said pretty mean things. . . . I've been told like a million times to go back to my country. At one point I almost got into a fight with someone, this was a guy, not a girl, I never have problems with girls, just guys. One of my friends had to literally drag me out, relax, it's not worth it." Luisa's friend led her out of a potential physical altercation, but Luisa speaks of

instances where it appears she takes the “fight” into the classroom in other ways. For example, when she spoke about how her background intersects with her college experiences, she shares that, “I’ve lived through what we’re talking about in class.”

During a debate in a philosophy class, she took a stance against organ-selling on the basis of economic inequality. She insists, “Even if we are all in America, we don’t all have access. I was trying to get that point across.”

When asked if there is anything in her background that affects her experiences as a college student, Tina explains,

I’ll go with race because that’s a big part of it. I am Mexican-American. Whenever I would take classes in high school and middle school, . . . teachers would think “oh, it’s just another stupid Mexican” and they would start picking on me until they realized I knew the material. I always thought that was a big part of why I wanted to go to college because I wanted to prove to everybody that I’m not the typical Mexican. I don’t want to say “typical Mexican” because that’s not how Mexicans are but that’s the stereotype and how some teachers see Mexicans. . . . Sometimes it’s hard [being a Mexican American in a college classroom] because the other students think I am just stupid. When the teacher has us working in groups they say, “I’ll do this” “I’ll do this” and I am just left there, like what am I going to do? But then when they see my grades, they happen to notice them and they think oh I am smart and start asking me questions and about how to study.

William worries about lowered expectations of the role “Hispanics” play in society: “People think that if you’re Hispanic, if you’re first generation, you’re not going to go anywhere, you’re not going to be anything, you’re just going to graduate from high school and go work a minimum wage job at McDonald’s.” As Miguel’s poem shows, he has dealt with several disempowering situations within the institution which he attributes to racism and discrimination. He felt compelled to file a complaint at one community college in the hopes that it would help other students in the future. For Miguel, education

is also a way to learn how to “defend your rights better” in racially hostile environments. Delilah is also motivated to succeed because of the difference it could make to others in her community and describes her perception that if others saw her success they might be persuaded to believe being Mexican and poor “does not mean college is not for you.”

Challenging the dominant discourse about academic deficits, Latino(a) counter-narratives tell a compelling story of resistance. Making sense of their college experiences involves invoking oppositional attitudes towards common stereotypes and misconceptions about Latino(a)s. While some research (Fordham & Ogbu 1986; Romo, 1998; Tatum, 2002) links oppositional attitudes in young people of color to a rejection of academic achievement they associate with White society, others (Fine & Weiss, 1998; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Valenzuela, 1993; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) point to forms of resistance that embrace academic success as a way to counter racial and social oppression. This study’s findings reveal that the oppositional stances students of color manifest in college signal they value, rather than devalue educational achievement. Moreover, students connect their personal achievement with wider societal transformation. For Miguel, William, Luisa, Tina, and Delilah, their own academic success paves the way for others, incremental gains toward changing oppressive stereotypes and social inequalities.

Angelina, born in the USSR, was raised as an orthodox Christian until the age of twelve, when she says she “found out I was Jewish.” She continues, “I started looking into those things. I learned more about the involvement of Russians in the Holocaust and how they were killing Jewish people. . . it was shocking . . . it gave me more clarity why my family was hiding that we were Jewish. I got a more broad perspective.” Perhaps



because of this heightened awareness, Angelina, too, like the Latino(a) students, recognizes forms of stereotyping as a social problem: “Here it’s like these people smell like this, these people talk like this. Who am I to judge? Until not very long ago, I didn’t know these people even existed.”

**Language and culture as barriers.** While the Latino(s) immigrant narratives included such details about navigating structural factors, the Afghan, Iraqi and Taiwanese immigrants cited language and/or cultural barriers as prevalent experiential factors in their educational journeys. Nazreen’s unfortunate hijab experience resulted in “her most disappointing class. I’m pretty sure she mixed us up. She would never come to class and I would.” Perhaps because of this experience, Nazreen dreams of a campus that “would have a lot of diversity” and “one-on-one time with professors.” Kahil is slowly climbing his way out of the developmental English classes. Upset that he did not know to prepare for the initial English placement test, he dreams of one day mastering the language enough to major in English. However, it is the culture of the American community college that he finds challenging and “strange.” He declares that compared to the society he knew in Iraq, American college students display a disrespect in the classroom which makes him very uncomfortable. He considers the education system here a “paradise” where there is not the same “wall between the professors and students” as in his home country. He has built good relationships with professors and staff members.

Lian, too, struggled with language acquisition, “I didn’t know English. I was on the airplane learning from A to Z, literally. Hard to adjust.” For Lian, combating the community college culture of isolation, stokes her desire for more bonding opportunities

on campus. Thinking dorms would help but “would be impossible to have” at the community college, Lian speaks of an ideal campus that would offer smaller classes so the professors can “know you” and more clubs, opportunities for building relationships.

### **Summary of The Immigrant Story**

In sum, the Immigrant Story is a complex narrative about oppositional stances, relationships with institutional agents that inculcate courage and persistence, encounters with racism and disempowering classroom interactions, matters of language and culture, and a sense that individual achievement translates to socio-political change. What characterizes their experiences is not an identity at odds with achievement as some research suggests (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Tatum, 2002) but one that embraces educational attainment. This study’s findings align well with previous studies (Casanova, 2010; Conchas, 2006) on disadvantaged, high-achieving students of color, where an institutional commitment to creating positive learning environments, especially hiring encouraging, empathetic faculty and reducing racial/ethnic tensions, can propel students toward academic excellence.

### **Hallmark Poem for The Second Chance: “Time for Whitney”**

#### **“Time for Whitney”**

i

Had a rough senior year in high school,  
stopped going,  
a couple of months before graduation.

Economic class always plays a role.

I didn’t grow up in a family that said,  
*hey, we have this money put aside for you to go to college.*  
There’s three other siblings, all about the same age.

Not something we talked about every night at the dinner table.  
 There wasn't—  
 that confidence,  
 that if you can make it there, we can pay for it.  
 If you wanted to go to college,  
 community college  
 was always how you did it.

I decided I wanted to be a nurse.  
 My mother, a nurse,  
 put herself through community college  
 when we were in school.  
 By example,  
 it influenced me.

*Start out slow, she said.  
 Make sure it's what you want.  
 Get the CNA, certified nursing assistant, bottom level of that path.  
 A little training class,  
 just be sure it's what you really want.  
 You're going to need to talk to ten people,  
 before you find out exactly the answer,  
 just keep at it,  
 keep asking questions,  
 go and speak to a counselor.*

I felt like I was ready to handle it.  
 I decided to start working towards it.  
 But I had to always work full-time.

My mom moved out of the country  
 Full-time work, my priority  
 It got too stressful,  
 I just dropped out that semester.

**ii**

Now, ten years later,  
 I wish I had understood a little more.  
 When you're in high school, you feel entitled  
 like it's their job, they should help me.  
 But  
 in college  
 you need to go seek that help.

Now, ten years later,  
 Nursing is more competitive now.

The things I did then, dropping classes  
are affecting me.  
I wish I would have known  
how important  
that time was, too.

I'm black and white,  
we get along with everybody.  
I would identify more with black people.  
I've definitely experienced racism.  
I've been called porch monkey.  
I remember  
being chased by some guys in a truck,  
swinging a chain,  
yelling names.  
I remember  
being outside the store  
he didn't like us hanging out there,  
calling us names,  
I remember  
working fast-food,  
mainly, just calling us names.

But,  
I never felt it held me back from goals or pushing forward—  
My mom made sure,  
we were confident  
in who we were,  
by making sure  
we knew who we were.

I did make school my priority.  
I am able to go to school full-time now  
because my husband works *very hard*  
and I am able to be successful.  
That's why I've been successful these past two years.  
This is for my family.

It's not really possible without financial aid.  
Affects what classes, how many I can take.  
Last semester,  
I was able to rent books,  
a third of what they cost.  
Even with financial aid, you have to get the books before the money comes through.

When I started, I just checked classes off the list.  
 Now, I look at the time,  
 if it's a harder class,  
 put classes together that would work together,  
 not put all the hard classes in the same semester.

iii

In a lot of my negative experiences,  
 yes, the teachers.  
 Some teachers don't seem to want you to get an "A."  
 A lot of teachers are *not* approachable.  
 I had a teacher who had a big ego.  
 I would ask a question.  
*We just covered it, he would say.*

Most disappointing class so far,  
 There was probably a third of the class left,  
 students dropped  
 or took the "F."  
 I tried and tried,  
 went to a lot of tutoring,  
 a class graded only on the exams,  
 very disappointing.  
 I did go all the way through.

A teacher's job,  
 I feel,  
 is to help you  
 navigate through the information presented  
 in such a way  
 so it's understandable,  
 so you are prepared,  
 for what you're expected to learn.

*It wasn't until I had a teacher who was very approachable that I succeeded.  
 Microbiology  
 challenging,  
 awesome.  
 She was just one of those teachers,  
 wanted you to do well.  
 Not trying to boost her ego,  
 like she knew more than you.  
 Would help you find the answer.  
 She was approachable.  
 Teachers made a difference to me.*

The staff,  
 some people don't want to give you the information.  
 They'll answer only the question you asked.  
 It's a puzzle,  
 trying to figure out  
 what questions you should be asking,  
 until you get all the answers.

If I had established a relationship with somebody,  
 it might have been helpful to navigate.  
 If I feel I can approach you,  
 any time,  
 and get some answers or some guidance,  
 I think that's really important.

*You need somebody in the know.*

### **Findings and Discussion of The Second Chance**

**Interrupted educations and the return to college.** Ranging in age from twenty-six to fifty-six, the seven high-achieving, low income students I categorize as “second-chancers” are diverse in background, self-identifying as Black and White (Whitney); Iranian (Farah); Mexican-American (Sylvia); White (Anne; Barry; Gloria; Sonia) and have several common characteristics. First, there is a prior history of an interrupted educational trajectory for a host of reasons. Job loss, full-time work, marriage and child-rearing, divorce, relocation, economic circumstances, the death of a spouse--all these personal situations mark the circuitous route back to the community college. In addition, even before their first failed attempt at college, all students recall vividly a past history of low or thwarted achievement attempts.

For all second-chancers, the return to college is an effort backed by a supportive network of family, friends, and institutional actors. While their primary goal for

returning to college is the need to secure gainful employment, second-chancers hold fast to the dream of working in a field they love, even if it means prolonging their educational journey. After all, they have borne numerous detours. Now that they have returned, the amount of time it takes to finish seems less important than securing fulfilling work, given the ebbs and flows they have already endured. As older college students, life experiences accumulated over time have presented a variety of social settings for them to negotiate, bringing multiple identities to the fore when they return to college. As they make sense of their community college worlds the second time around, they describe classroom interactions that seem to intersect with their perceived social and cultural identities. Perhaps because of their commitment to their renewed attempt, second-chancers scrutinize teaching and learning environments. Their narratives are among the most finely detailed accounts of the ways teaching practices in particular mediate their academic experiences and successful persistence.

**Making sense of obstacles.** As Whitney's poem shows, full-time employment, a necessary state for this self-supporting young woman, can be incredibly difficult to negotiate while attending college. Her return to college at twenty-six reflects new strategies for success. The Child Development Center is an important resource, freeing her to both attend class and to study for hours in the library. Not working full-time contributes so much to her persistence that she and her husband are a one-income family, struggling but supporting her academic goals. Other second-chancers display similar resilience when facing strenuous situations. Anne, a thirty-five-year-old widow and mother of a four-year-old son, says she will be the first person in her family to have a college degree. When she lived in Pennsylvania, she survived two devastating car

accidents. One put her in a coma for four days; the other, three years later, “broke all the bones” in her body. Afterwards, she sought help from a “realization center” but did not get the support she had hoped for. “They told me I’d never use my hands again and that I had so much brain damage that I should just get a factory job.” But Anne, who calls herself a “fighter,” continued to heal, and speaks of a “determination” she feels propels her through the community college. “I am not planning to stop at the AA,” she declares.

**Driving forward: supportive networks.** Divorced twice, juggling finances and childcare, forty-year old Sylvia has also had to contend with adult Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), but the diagnosis, which came after she started college, was a “relief.” Noticing how difficult it was for her to “keep on task” throughout prior educational experiences, Sylvia worried “maybe you’re not that smart.” The diagnosis “was enlightening, it lifted something off. It’s not just me. It’s my brain and I can’t help it. That’s kept me kind of going.” Identifying as Mexican-American, Sylvia says she is self-conscious about the way she speaks because her parents spoke only Spanish at home. Even years later, she worries she isn’t speaking English “the right way.” With high absenteeism while she cared for her father during her parents’ divorce, she confesses she “barely finished high school.” Literally shaking when she made her first phone call to the community college, Sylvia “didn’t even want to tell anybody that I was thinking about [going to college].”

Like Sylvia, Barry, at 56 years of age, has returned to school after a disappointing educational past. “I felt like a failure. I was a little dyslexic and not as outgoing and didn’t excel . . . there were low expectations.” Mirroring Sylvia and Barry, Anne remembers, “When I was in second grade, I got placed in the average reading group and



my friends were in the above reading group. I didn't like that. I didn't like the feeling that I wasn't good enough. Pretty much second grade on, I really struggled with school. I didn't see the point of going." Anne admits she intentionally "missed a lot of school" and yet, "they kept passing me along." Unable to afford going to college, Sonia, now 40, had entered the military after high school hoping to achieve a high position, "a position usually set aside for men." When she experienced a "backlash" because she was a woman, she retreated, "I intentionally got pregnant and got out of the Air Force." Despite, or perhaps because of, these experiences, second-chancers return to school like octopi with tentacles outstretched, toward the supportive connections with others that play a role in their successful persistence.

Within that network are Sonia's "husband and children" who "absolutely encourage me to stay in school." There are friends, like the one who told Gloria about the community college paralegal program, sparking an interest in criminal justice and resulting in a job at the court as a paid student intern. And there are the institutional actors, counselors and faculty who provide many forms of assistance. Lorenzo, Sylvia's Disabled Student Program Services (DSPS) counselor, stepped in at a very crucial moment, a tearful test-taking day when all seemed to be going awry for her. "I just wanted to quit," Sylvia admits. Lorenzo took Sylvia outside, contacted her instructor to re-schedule the test, and told her that quitting "is not you." Sylvia recalls, "My personal problem was affecting my school. He was supportive, not just academically but emotionally. He knows I care about my grades."

**Attitudes about new directions.** Now that they have returned to school, studying a subject they love seems to be a rallying factor behind the continued persistence of the

second chancers. Gloria is thirty-eight and has already earned a bachelor's degree, but she intends "to study for the rest of my life." Although she is poised to secure a job at a federal court, she is not sure she will remain in the field, laughing as she calls it a bit "depressing" and considering a new direction towards Nutrition. Barry was fifty-five when he was laid off. He has already transferred to the state university once as a Political Science major and is now back fulfilling the prerequisites for a Business degree at a different transfer institution. Although employability is a factor, Barry repeats throughout the interview his "genuine interest" in learning, in the invigorating accumulation of knowledge for knowledge's sake. "If I had time, I would take every freakin class this place offers and I wish I would've taken them thirty-five years ago." Farah has changed course several times, from photography to business management to math.

**Perspectives on teaching and learning.** Zooming the lens on teaching and learning environments, second-chancers do not spare the feelings of faculty they consider ineffective. I present only a few of the many comments second-chancers made about less than stellar classroom faculty. Barry recollects a "horrible experience" with an instructor he claims, "could not have cared less about us learning the material. All he cared about was could we pass his tests. I'm there to get the information. I feel cheated when I attend a class like that. He cheated me out of the opportunity to learn business law." A negative classroom experience led Sylvia to drop a Spanish course and register for another at a different campus that is quite a distance from her home, causing an additional financial burden. "The way she made me feel was horrible. I'm not one to have someone treat me like less of a human being. Everybody is worth something. We're all equal. We're all

human beings. . . . She didn't make you want to learn and she talked negative about Mexicans. She didn't know I was Mexican. She made sure we knew not to question her.”

### **Summary of The Second Chance**

Second-chancers display a fierce perseverance and drive honed in the face of extremely difficult personal challenges, including job loss, disabilities, single motherhood, and myriad economic hardships. As they make sense of their return to college, they convey attitudes of appreciation toward the new educational opportunities afforded them and fortitude toward changing circumstances. Experienced college students, they have no qualms about evaluating faculty effectiveness or ineffectiveness and, like the Immigrant Story participants, they cite supportive networks within and without the institution as playing an important role in their successful persistence. Much research (Kuh, 2001; Tinto, 2000; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005) has documented the important role of college faculty on student engagement, achievement and retention. Thus, second-chancers point unreservedly to the institution's responsibility to ensure quality teaching, based on caring and high expectations. It follows, then, that community college faculty play a large role in students' academic outcomes.

### **Hallmark Poem for Leaving a Legacy: “Curtis’ Last Chance”**

#### **“Curtis’ Last Chance”**

Your age?

53.

Doing the math I wanted to finish before I close my eyes for good.

Did you always think you would go to college?

I wanted to.

My first go around--

I thought more of Southern Comfort and cornflakes than I did of college.

My second go around--

I was in the Marine Corps in Japan. They had a teacher from the University of Pennsylvania over there. I got straight A's. Then a B -- I thought I was a failure and just quit.

Now?

I'm here for a purpose.

What influenced your decision?

Worked 15 years for a company making \$14 an hour and one week vacation.

Had enough and walked out.

Wrote a book, got it published

Sold 7500 copies.

Sadly, that's the only thing I ever finished in my life.

I couldn't find a job for two years.

Money

does

not

last

long.

Living on someone's couch,  
Homeless veterans' program,  
I got to do something with my life.

I found the school here, the funny thing is I found it off of Craig's list.  
Trying to find employment again in the legal community. And that's when everyone said you need a piece of paper.

I found this program, this ABA approved legal program.

You get all sorts of leads.

I was going to go to law school online.

The professor told me why bother to do that there's a law school right here in the city.

You don't have to have a BA to go to law school.

All's you gotta do is have 15 years experience legal

which I do

and an AA.

For me, losing everything put me here.

Challenges?

Argument with a professor,

My age-wise and his,

we kind of conflicted.

Our political views, wider than an opinion between an atheist and a Christian.  
 It was that wide.  
 I learned a lot.  
 First exam, I rolled a 52.  
 A wake up call.  
 If I'm going to do this venture, I need to start taking it seriously.  
 the turning point,  
 people get that view that hey it's *only* a community college.  
 Even I was kind of like that.  
 He woke me up: don't waste my time  
 I can appreciate that now.  
 I learned a lot more.  
 Now I'm here for a purpose.

How has it changed?  
 Get my books earlier,  
 Take better notes,  
 Ask more questions,  
 Before I didn't want to ask more questions,  
     (Why is the old guy asking questions, how stupid can he be?)  
 A lot of issues going on.  
 I went to therapy  
 and that helped a lot.

Background?  
 I've done it all.  
 Until recently, I had pretty low self esteem.  
 I  
     never  
         thought  
             I  
                 could  
                     do  
                         anything.

Was a C and D student in high school.  
 Never turned anything in.  
 Priorities were different.  
 I hit the bottle real well.  
 I hit 18,  
 the alcohol was nonstop.  
 Spent 12 years in the Marine Corps.  
 The alcohol,  
 the bottle, got me in trouble.  
 Been married twice, lost that.

*Twice.*

Lost custody of the kids.  
 In a nutshell: it was time to grow up.  
     I didn't want to die a failure.

And this, this gave me,  
 -- a sense of accomplishment.

Encouraging me to stay in school?  
 Hell, you should have sat in my therapy sessions lately.  
 I met the right woman at the wrong time,  
 no job, no nothing.  
 90% of my motivation was I was going to show her that I could be somebody.  
 And I still try today.

We broke up.  
 When things get tough in my life,  
 I quit.

She's still the motivation  
 but  
 it's a sense of accomplishment you get when you finish.  
 I can honestly say that I started out on something and I finished.  
 I didn't miss a class.  
 This summer I had a therapy appointment and couldn't miss that  
 but that's the only class I ever missed.

Biggest hurdle?  
 Trying to work full time and carry a full load every semester.  
 I took 15 or 17 credits the first semester, I worked 40 hours  
 I thought that's 57 hours,  
 I can do that,  
 no problem.  
 Little did I know it was 3 hours in the classroom and 3 hours of homework.  
 It was a challenge.

I had to take bunny slope math and bunny slope English.  
 That's what I get trying to take that assessment at 7 o'clock in the morning  
 on Vicodin.

Legal classes at night were more my age.  
 I rolled a 4.0 in all the legal classes.  
 That felt good.  
 Always nice to study with one other individual.  
 Lucked out,

there was a guy in there could come up with things I was missing  
and it was vice versa.  
Some of those people come to me and ask me for help.  
That stroked my ego a little bit.

EOPS counselor,  
I think she is genuine and sincere.  
It's very few and far between you run into someone like that  
on campus  
or off campus.  
She helped me out a great deal.  
I've never heard her say an unkind word  
to anybody.

And other counselors?  
I don't even know this chick's name  
She even saw me after hours  
I listened to somebody who said they didn't have to take Algebra,  
they were taking business math.  
I said I wanted that--  
She said it depends what catalog you came in under.  
I said what the hell is that?  
She spent an hour out of her time to give me a hand.

Bad experience?  
Dean Jacoby, is that her name?  
Her and I kind of went at it over graduation.  
The people who came for me are the only ones who read the website  
about not bringing a camera.  
Come, and I see,  
For x amount of dollars you can have your picture taken.  
Order today  
or you will have a late fee.  
I expressed my concerns.  
I look at it as--  
the only one who's benefiting is this guy who's taking the pictures.  
She said it's a logistics problem.  
I think it would be easier to correct the problem than put money in this guy's pocket. I  
just think that's wrong.

To be honest with you  
I didn't want to go to graduation,  
I'm beyond that,  
but I'm glad I did.  
It was for everybody else.

Those who were in my corner,  
and even those who doubted me were there.

Ideal college?  
My favorite professor,  
Thing I admire about her is--  
she helped me have a higher standard than everybody else.  
She was real blunt about it.  
She was tough, no nonsense.  
I value my time now,  
I'm here to learn.  
*Boom.*

Disappointing class?  
English,  
I haven't even seen her to yell at her yet.  
She gave me a B,  
I can't believe she gave me a B.  
I think it was a political thing.  
She and I didn't see eye to eye.

Success strategies?  
Go to class every day,  
I never missed a semester because I knew  
if I stopped,  
I would never come back.

Losing everything was the best thing that ever happened to me.  
Without losing everything,  
I would never have come here.  
I would've stayed  
at that company  
and flatlined  
forever.

The education I've gotten here isn't second to anyone.

### **Findings and Discussion of Leaving a Legacy**

**The Last Chance.** For some students of a certain age (all in their fifties), one motivating factor for pursuing a college education is not about “second chances” at all, but about what they sense to be their *last* chance. Curtis, Kevin, Ernest and Justine are



keenly aware that time is not necessarily on their side. At fifty-three, Curtis, who identifies as White, states matter-of-factly in this section's opening poem, "I wanted to finish before I close my eyes for good." When he was 49, Kevin, who is African-American, lost his job at a uniform company when he hurt his back "lifting too much" at work. Now 51, Kevin, like Curtis, worries about his approaching elder years. "If I get a new career, I can support [my family] better for the rest of my life, maybe leave something for them, maybe have a little fun in my senior years." Returning to college in his late fifties, Ernest, who is White, emphasizes the "awkwardness" he felt his first semester because, "I'm much, much, much older." Orphaned at 14 and placed into foster care, Justine is White and 59 years old. She was initially fearful of going to college, "I'm so much older, the technology has changed a lot. It was 1972. There were no computers then. I was scared." However, after raising a family and seeing all her children "with their degrees and everything," she says it was time for her to finally pursue her own education. "I didn't need a piece of paper to prove I knew anything but I really wanted it. It's for me. . . . This is for me."

When Ernest was laid off after years of work as a superintendent in construction, he started a painting business. When that failed, he found himself returning to carpentry for only three days and feeling the ravages of time: "I'm too old for this. It's a young man's game. I never even collected my pay. I was just done. I've got to find something else to do." His decision to go to college is directly connected to his advancing age. Majoring in Business Management will enable him to return to construction "as a manager rather than a supervisor," a position he deems more suitable for someone his age.

**Identity, determination and self-esteem.** These four interviewees, three men and one woman, speak much about the firm resolve they bring to their community college life, a resolve they connect to their identities as re-entry or older college students. Ernest calls himself “single-minded” and insists, “This is my plan and I’m going to finish it.” Justine says she is “stubborn, just stubborn. I don’t want to give up. I’m not ready to give up on any of it.” Kevin’s purposefulness is summarized in a “vow” he made to himself to never get behind in his academic work. One of his success strategies is to work in advance as much as possible. If an instructor gives weekly online assessments, he tries to complete the assignments early. “Then I can get ahead and use the time to study for another class.” Curtis states matter-of-factly, “Now I’m here for a purpose.”

Common to all are less than stellar previous educational histories coupled with pivotal life experiences that seemingly propel them toward college with this renewed determination. Ernest, a high school dropout, blames the Wall Street banking crisis and subprime loan fiasco for the reduction from 50 superintendents to five. His layoff led to losing a beloved condo to a short sale and to a situation he finds quite intolerable but necessary to fulfilling his education plans. “Moving in with mom when I’m in my late fifties—oh—it was horrible! . . . I moved in with my mother the semester before I started.” His financial world in collapse, he relies on food stamps and medical insurance through the county’s low income health plan. His upcoming financial challenges worry him as well. He mentions that he will have only a six month grace period before he will have to start paying back student loans.

Now an honor student, Curtis was a homeless veteran and recovering alcoholic only three years prior to the interview. He recalls being a “C/D student in high school”

and admits he struggles with “pretty low self esteem.” Likewise, Kevin describes himself as “the proverbial goofball” and confesses he did not put his “aptitude into play in high school.”

**Issues with remedial education practices.** Not realizing the importance of the initial placement test, Curtis narrates in a deadpan voice how he “had to take bunny slope math and bunny slope English.” Characterizing remedial classes in such a way is reminiscent of what Rose (2013) calls the “interlayered dimensions of educational remediation—the curricular and ideological, the structural and symbolic” (p. 128). As Curtis makes sense of his community college experiences, he uses a label that reflects long-standing societal attitudes about the remedial designation, ideas about the lower cognitive abilities of those whose test scores are used by the institution to place them into a remedial track.

Rose traces these ideas back to the influence of early twentieth century behavioral psychologists. The thinking persists to this day and is often connected to class and race in pernicious ways, such as linking race to IQ. Overrepresented in remedial classes, low-income students, many of whom are people of color, must bear the load of numerous remedial courses in math, reading and writing. The stigma associated with taking remedial courses has much to do with the subordinate place such courses hold within the institution. These courses do not count toward degrees, compounding the time and economic demands on these students.

**Perspectives about the purpose of college and the curriculum.** As students attempt to make sense of their “placement” within the educational hierarchy, they voice their perspectives about other institutional aspects, such as the purpose of college and the

nature of the curriculum. Justine finds an excessive emphasis on memorization, tests, and scores as misguided and retorts that “it doesn’t measure how much you learn. You’re not going to be more wise.” Kevin questions the value of forcing all students to take the same math curriculum. Struggling to solve equations in his current math class, he jokingly observes how the teacher was impressed with his problem-solving skills: “You’re the only one in the class who gets all the word problems. How do you do that?” For Kevin, math needs to be relevant to the real world. “I’m not going to be a scientist. I’m not going to build buildings. I’m just going to do the last thirty years of my life doing a job. I don’t need to know Trig. I don’t need to know Calc.” One of Kevin’s most positive experiences in the classroom was the semester he was enrolled in both an African American studies course and Introduction to Jazz. A songwriter and self-taught musician who “can play just about any instrument you put in front of me,” Kevin is enthralled by the ways the “meshing” of these disciplines increased his learning beyond what he was exposed to in previous history courses. “African Americans are people without a country, without a history really. It’s a positive experience because I am learning more about my race.” When his Jazz instructor spoke about Negro spirituals, Kevin sang a song for the class.

**Interactions with peers.** Cultural influences on sensemaking include expectations that individuals develop about particular persons and their roles (Harris, 1994). If applied to these Leave a Legacy student narratives, there is a pattern of maternal and paternal role-playing with the younger students they encounter on campus. Orphaned at fourteen and placed into foster care, Justine describes her desire to reach out to younger students “who come here from difficult circumstances.” She intentionally

interacts with the “young mothers, the ones who fall through the cracks.” She admits, “I didn’t have their guts. I dropped out and had my kids and used them as an excuse not to have to go back to school. I look at them and I encourage them. I help them.” Prior military training influences Kevin’s experiences in the classroom: “I used to be an instructor in the military. I know that the instructor wants your attention and you should pay attention so you don’t have to ask a question somebody has already asked.” He does not hesitate to directly engage with rambunctious, younger students he assumes might not be mature enough for college. Like an experienced sage, he explains, “They’re kids to me. I don’t disrespect them. First I’ll say ‘people, please.’ Then I’ll give them that daddy look.”

**Role of faculty.** Resonating throughout the narratives of these older students is the same desire to engage with faculty that is a distinct feature of the entire high-achieving, low-income collective. Indeed, the students credit a variety of relationships (professors, counselors, family, peers) as contributing to their success. Kevin asserts that he studies more for math than all his other subjects combined, “I study that hard. I want an A or a B.” He observes that he and the other older students in math “are having problems” because the instructor “is teaching to the kids who already understand.” Explaining further, he adds that he visits the math lab and “gets unconfused” only to return to the classroom and experience further frustration. He compares his current math instructor to a previous one who was “encouraging,” “spent the time,” and “knew how to go over the basics enough times, the pacing was better.” He thinks the latter math instructor has skills in creating a positive learning environment and smiles as he

remembers how she would distribute candy to those intrepid enough to go up to the board and try the problems. He notes that she displayed care for everyone in the classroom.

Conversely, perceptions about unsupportive professorial behaviors and attitudes are identified impediments to their persistence. Justine comments that “passionate” teachers who “love what they do” are key in making the “whole classroom come alive.” But Ernest narrates a negative experience with an “insane” algebra instructor who demands that his students keep their hands at the level of their desks during exams and enforces that with constant surveillance, making him and other students feel ill at ease. Despite this negative interaction, Ernest still seeks engagement with other professors, mentioning a planned visit with a statistics instructor to get advice about what to study. Curtis declares, “There hasn’t been a professor I haven’t liked.” He most appreciates the frequency of the interaction with community college professors. Having taken classes at a local university, he complains about the presence of teaching assistants and severely limited engagement with university faculty. “I saw the professor three times, the first day of class, the day prior to the midterm, the day prior to the final. I felt cheated.” Kevin thinks the campus can help students like him keep succeeding if “counselors and the professors look for students who need that extra kick, like myself.”

**Role of student support programs.** While the Extended Opportunity Program Services (EOPS) department is instrumental in offering much-needed financial support (e.g. book vouchers, bus passes), interactions with EOPS counselors are most frequently cited as contributing to the students’ persistence. For Justine, the EOPS counselor functions as an empowerment agent (Stanton-Salazar, 2010). “They want to see everybody achieve their potential. Even if you don’t think you have it, they think you do.

They prop you up!” Dialogue is encouraged, she says, whether it’s about finances or personal matters. “I had a difficult time with the divorce. They let you talk to them. They really try to help you resolve those problems.” Kevin, who says he struggled to understand the college system itself, explains that he simply “didn’t know what to ask” and credits his EOPS counselor with clarifying important registration and course enrollment procedures. In this section’s opening poem, Curtis lavishes praise on the help he has received from an EOPS counselor he considers “genuine,” “sincere,” and “kind.”

**Age and Identity.** Playing the role of the achieving, older student also appears to involve negotiating academic and social identities. Justine complains about timed math assessments that she feels do not accurately measure her knowledge. “I can do the problems but they time you. My reaction time. I’m obviously older. I like to do a thorough job so it takes me longer. If you take your time and do it right, it will take you longer and then you fail.” Being the same age as the professor can also have its advantages. Justine is amused that younger students do not appreciate one of her professor’s jokes: “The fact is we’re almost the same age. I’ll make a comment and no one in the whole class will understand it. He should have been a stand up comedian. Come on, kids, laugh!” Curtis thinks age was a factor in a conflict he once had (and resolved) with an instructor. When asked to talk about some of the positive experiences he has had on campus, Curtis first lauds the “interaction with the [younger] students.” Not having had contact with his own children for many years, he alleges “I know where my kids are coming from now. I took that from these guys.” Ernest, too, talks about overcoming his initial discomfort with being an older student. “I started feeling

comfortable here. Now I have friends who are in their twenties. I no longer feel awkward hanging out with kids younger than my children.”

### **Summary of Leave a Legacy**

The experiences of legacy-leavers highlight several important factors having impact on their college experiences. First, as among the oldest students on campus, they can hear “Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near” (Marvell, 1650) and demonstrate a concerted determination to complete their educational goals before time runs out.

Although they have overcome incredibly debilitating personal circumstances (homelessness, unemployment, bankruptcy, physical disability, to name a few), they forge ahead with characteristic altruism, helping younger students along the way.

Pragmatic and realistic, they desire educational experiences that are relevant to real-world applications and necessary for re-entry into the workforce.

They also point to problems with the curriculum and placement practices as obstacles to overcome. Curtis’ narrative in particular emphasizes these issues, which are receiving much attention in current research. Sparks (2013) reports that studies at Teachers College, Columbia University and the Harvard Graduate School of Education have found college placement practices to be overused, resulting in huge numbers (many times a majority of students tested) being placed into remedial course tracks. Most significantly, many of the students, they learned, do not need remediation at all. Once placed into these tracks, however, getting off the remedial train is extraordinarily difficult for community college students.



And, finally, like the immigrant stories and second-chance narratives before them, legacy-leavers chronicle the profound impact institutional agents have on their success.

Once again, the role of the faculty is a critical component.

**Hallmark Poem for “Yes I Can”: “Joshua: It comes from within”**

**“Joshua: It comes from within”**

i

I,

always wanted to go to college,  
always wanted to learn.

My mom dropped out of middle school.  
My dad dropped out of high school.

I

at 13,  
got interested in dancing.  
Met this girl,  
she was fantastic.

I

turned out to be pretty good at the dancing.

I

competed across the country,  
competed internationally,  
competed at the world championships.  
It really taught me  
how to compete.

The biggest thing has to be something that comes from within you.

You have to want it.

I see people

not taking it seriously.

They don't understand

you have to want it.

Take advantage of this  
opportunity.

I enjoy learning.  
I don't read  
*those books* people are reading.  
I read  
research articles,  
scientific books,  
genetic anthropology,  
origins of genetics.

I  
want to have a career,  
be successful,  
have a respected, admired profession  
make lots of money.

I  
am 27.  
I'm ancient for a community college student.

I  
am white.  
I think it's really important that you have diversity.  
Everyone  
brings unique experiences.  
It's not like any one race  
is more intelligent.  
I hear that a lot.  
Why are all the Asians always getting A's?  
It's not because they're Asian.  
It's because of their culture.  
So.  
You have to appreciate the strengths  
people of all different backgrounds  
bring to the classroom.

I  
don't feel I've been jumping over hurdles  
more like  
running through them.  
My mom's cancer.  
That's a huge one.  
Dealing with that,  
staying focused on school.  
There's nothing anyone  
can do for me with that.

I  
 study  
 in order to practice something I've learned.  
 I have 13 different color dry erase markers, whiteboard, little napkin  
 I colorcode the sections of the book I'm reading.  
 I take a picture of it.  
 I put it on Facebook.  
 I wipe off my whiteboard and start over again.  
 It might seem strange  
 to do everything in a different color,  
 a little bit OCD.  
 But,  
 I don't have to worry  
 about losing my notebook.  
 Friends  
 can look at it too  
 if it helps them.  
 It's relaxing for me  
 to do that.

People get really wrapped up in their own story,  
 use hardships as an excuse to fail.  
 You're not defined by your hardships.  
 You're defined by what you do about them.  
 You have a choice.  
 Try and succeed or choose to be defeated.  
 Ultimately, the choice is yours.  
 You make your own choice.

Being a student at a college  
 It takes a lot more  
 discipline and motivation.

Discipline and motivation  
 can only come from within you.

Focus first on school.  
 Be a starving college student, happy  
 driving a 1994 Honda Civic,  
 Not distracted from your studies, struggling  
 to pay your insurance.  
 Cheap car, cheap gas, cheap insurance.  
 It just makes sense.  
 That's why they're called starving college students.

## ii

A summer internship in a cancer research facility,  
 We had an assignment,  
 She was procrastinating,  
 I was being proactive,  
 It was awful.

The head of the program sat us down,  
 Talked to us about procrastination

*I wouldn't want you working on my team.*

*You can't just wing it.*

*You can't do things last minute.*

*You have to realize that if you want to be successful.*

It made a difference.

We repeated the assignment.

I had to take the follower role.

I got to practice taking her direction,  
 which was not easy for me.

There's a 24 hour coffee shop,  
 Whenever possible, I don't go home.  
 Taking care of my mom has been difficult.  
 There's a lot of pressure—  
 I'm trying to compartmentalize.

I'm comfortable talking to all my professors.  
 I've spoken with them many times,  
 Not afraid to let them know how I feel.  
 I keep a regular communication,  
 Let them know—  
 I am involved.  
 I'm not just sitting in the back of the class on Facebook.  
 I took the time  
 developing those relationships  
 to get to know them.

Before classes even start,  
 might be crazy,  
 but I send them an email to introduce myself.  
 I took the time to look them up.  
 It helped us develop a relationship,

early on.  
I've had loads of experiences like that.

You can approach your professors.  
If you put the work  
into making yourself approachable.  
The experience you have on campus is entirely up to you.

The best experience I've ever had with a professor  
Physics class,  
Really high expectations,  
Not apologetic,  
Ruthless.  
I appreciated that.  
You learn to meet high expectations.  
You can get confidence from that.

I'm involved in the science club.  
My responsibility was to organize some presentations.  
I was at my wit's end!  
I didn't know  
where to get supplies,  
what supplies were available.  
I called the department head the day before the event.  
She called me at 6:30 a.m. the next day  
gave me everything I needed.  
Access to the lab technicians,  
all the supplies,  
to make the demonstration a success.  
She's a good person.

In part due to good relationships with some of my professors,  
I took part in this program,  
targeting minorities and disadvantaged students,  
giving them an opportunity,  
to work in cancer research at the university,  
designed to give an opportunity,  
to realize they are capable and competent and able,  
to work in a career in science.  
It satisfies my desire to help my mom.  
I can't do anything for her personally  
but I feel I am contributing in some way.

My Biology professor brought the people in to talk to the class.  
My other professor, Dr. Xavier, really influential,

wrote a letter of recommendation,  
 got me into the program.  
 He picks a student or two each semester to mentor,  
 To encourage you to stay on course.  
 He tells you,  
 he'll support you,  
 but you have to earn all A's.  
 B is a failing grade.

The program  
 has really changed my outlook on things.  
 You're not expected to know anything when you get there,  
 they train you,  
 time management, organization skills, presentation skills,  
 lots of experience working in the lab,  
 Paid like an employee.  
 Seminars everyday—  
 I've met a couple of researchers who've published in *Nature*.  
 You have to be able to show what you know.  
 That's the point of an education—  
 to be able to present what you know to an employer.

### iii

I study a lot.  
 17 units.  
 Biology, Physics, Calculus, English, an athletics class, full plate.  
 Between classes, I would go to the nice, new math lab.  
 It was quiet and I'd study in there.  
 One day,  
 a professor told me I needed to leave,  
 because I wasn't studying math.  
 I was in there studying Physics.  
 Very rude, stood over my shoulder until I noticed her.  
 She had no identification,  
 I didn't know she was a professor.  
     *Can I help you?*  
     *You can't study here.*  
     *There's people sitting there on Facebook. I'm sitting there studying.*

I was outraged.  
 If you're going to ask me to leave,  
 tell me who you are,  
 don't make me turn away from my studying  
 I was working on my schoolwork.

I was never messing around.  
Her interaction with me was not professional.

I never followed up on it.  
I really wanted to go to some faculty meeting and voice my concerns,  
have the policies change.  
She reflects poorly on the community college.  
My mom was going through chemo  
I never had time to follow up.

I've had mixed experiences with counselors here.  
Times they're really helpful,  
Times they're not prepared, lack of training  
I've been misled about my academic choices.  
I don't blame them.  
I should know as a student.  
It can get pretty busy,  
maybe they are overtaxed.

Tough first semester.  
Took the placement test,  
they told me I could take any math class I wanted.  
I took Trigonometry, had to drop out, didn't belong in that class.  
A year and a half into my education,  
I decided to go back to the math I knew first.  
Fill in the gaps.  
I probably would have advanced faster if I had been told  
to start somewhere more basic in the first place.

I had a Biology teacher.  
She was awful!  
First day of class, this woman tells the class,  
half of you are going to fail,  
the other half of you are here because you were here last semester.  
Basically, she's saying  
right now, the first day of class,  
you have a room full of failures.  
If she's expecting half the class to fail on the first day,  
she's not doing her job as a teacher.  
To have that attitude towards your students,  
I have no respect for her.  
I earned a *C* *in spite of* her,  
not *because of* her.

In my dream,

college would be free.  
 We have all those beautiful new labs,  
 why is there not some research project going on here?  
 It could be done—  
 even at the community college,  
 you guys better get on it!

In my dream,  
 it has to be diverse.  
 A really, really wide range of ethnicities, races, cultures, parts of the world,  
 economic backgrounds.  
 That's important.

In my dream,  
 there would be no grades given.  
 Put the priority on the learning,  
 not the grades.  
 People will learn.

In my dream,  
 have a really structured class,  
 lots of opportunities to get involved.  
 A professor who understands—  
 you have to interact.

### **Findings and Discussion of “Yes, I can” Narratives**

**Confident, with eyes on the prize.** As this section's opening poem shows, twenty-seven year old Joshua always thought he would go to college. His “Yes, I can” narrative shows one of the ways high-achieving, low-income students make sense of their community college world. All in their twenties, save for one teenager, five student participants (Joshua, Josie, Kim, Leo and Nancy) exhibit exuberant levels of confidence in their ability to succeed in college, a characteristic that distinguishes them from the other 20 participants in this study. Keeping their eyes on the prize, these students see the self as more focused, more directed, and more skilled than their peers. They ascribe their success to certain personal attributes, including a high degree of motivation, hard work,



intelligence, and optimism. Although they believe their achievements are due primarily to such qualities, they also speak much about the value of connections with others on campus.

“I’m going to get a Ph.D. even if I don’t need it,” asserts nineteen-year-old Nancy, who identifies as White. Self-assured and owning what she calls a “strong sense of self,” Nancy has no doubt she is going to succeed academically. As she articulates details about her personality, she returns often to her certainty about her aptitude for intellectual work and her perception that she is different than her community college peers. “I consider myself a huge thinker. I feel I think about things other people don’t.” Nancy is convinced her peers “come up to me because obviously I know. I’m always the person who raises my hand and tries to answer. If I don’t say anything, the class will be silent.” She talks about an ideal college as a place absent of “drooling sleepers.” Although Nancy remarks that her mother has “always believed” in her ability, she insists, “But I’m not always with her. I drive myself to keep going. I see the light at the end of the tunnel. I’m going to get there.”

Similarly, Leo, says, “I was always intelligent, articulate in some way.” A twenty-nine year-old single White father of a toddler girl, Leo admits that while he does think about how pursuing a degree can help him create a better life for her, he stays in school because of his own “self-motivation.” He says his high degree of motivation stems from early childhood experiences where a “lack of parental attention” taught him to be more “self-sufficient.” In his family, the expectation was that one would go to work, not to college. “Generations of just workers, that’s how you did it, you work your way up the chain.” Behavioral differences between him and his peers were the most

challenging aspect of his first semester at college. “You look around the classroom and you see maybe two or three people who are focusing, really paying attention. Everyone else is playing with their phone or looking around the room or staring at a desk. Those kinds of things are really a distraction. They suck the energy out of a room. You’re trying to focus, pay attention, get involved.” Leo assumes a leadership role by forming study groups, which he considers a form of teaching. “I find it very helpful to teach.” Like Nancy, Leo makes sense of the obstacles he encounters by “envision[ing] the light at the end of the tunnel.”

**Relationships with faculty and counselors.** Joshua’s poem is rich with details about the webs of relationships, the interactions and bonds that contributed to his successful persistence. Influential others include professors who paved the way for internship opportunities at a local university, mentors and classroom faculty who insist upon rigorous standards, and interventions by caring institutional agents who provide important resources and support at critical moments. Like Joshua, Leo forged a close relationship with a professor whom he deeply admired.

A lot of the positive experiences I’ve had come from when I get to personally interact with the instructors. Like Professor Marques, I’ve been out of his class for a year now and I’m still grading tests for him. I’ve thought about it before, why do I respect him. It’s the same as like a karate student who respects a sensei. There’s so much wealth of knowledge there, and mass amounts of intelligence, you just have to respect him, you can’t help it. Anything I can do to . . . make his life a little easier, it’s fine by me.

Josie, too, affirms that she has “had really great teachers.” When prompted to say more about those teachers, Josie described a specific type of interaction: “I like that I can talk to my teachers like they are my peers. If I need help, I can go to them and it’s not that weird, professor/student underling thing.” Just as Joshua indicates in his poem, Josie has not always had good experiences with counselors who “confused” her and did not answer her questions clearly. However, she adds that when she visited the Counseling office again, she found a counselor who not only answered “every little question” she had but also went out of her way to help her. “Even if she doesn’t know the answer, she finds it. She’s helped me a lot.” When asked why she thought the counselor went out of her way to help her, Josie claims “cause she cares about students. I think that’s why most people would teach or help at community.”

Leo pronounces all his experiences with counselors “outstanding,” and notes that “They’ve helped. They’ve gone out of their way to actually explain anything confusing. I didn’t know the difference between a UC and a state school. They went out of their way and made sure I was fully aware of what was happening.” In contrast to her school experiences in Vietnam, where “students just listen to the professor and are afraid to have ideas,” Kim, who is now in her twenties, observes a more fluid type of communication between teachers and students here. Within the American college setting, Kim notices that “whenever the student has questions or problems, they just ask the professor right away and the professor likes to help them.”

**Institutional impediments to success.** As the opening poem demonstrates, whether it is Joshua’s expression of “outrage” when he was ejected from the quiet space where he was trying to study, or his articulation of disappointment when an instructor

declared on the first day of the semester that half the class would fail, the narratives include students' perceptions of institutional impediments to their success. Teaching practices form the bulk of their commentary. Josie and Leo both connect their academic performance to the instructor's pedagogy. For Josie, having a teacher "who just talked to the board and didn't take any questions" translated into "not learning anything." Leo would direct a newcomer to the college to "professors I have taken that I believe are going to motivate that student. The attention that the professor gives back to the student. I can tell the quality of the work I perform is different depending how the class is taught. If the class is taught tremendously well, then I'm going to put in twice the effort . . . to impress the professor." Nancy thirsts for "interactive" classroom experiences like the very "satisfying" Human Sexuality class: "Each group would take turns arguing the point and we really were learning." She is disappointed when instructors tend to focus on students memorizing information, a situation that makes it "difficult" to stay the course and earn good grades.

When asked what the campus could do to help them keep succeeding, students call for greater institutional support. Leo suggests more advertising of clubs and events on campus and claims, "Those kinds of interactions with the campus help you succeed. If you're more involved with the campus, you will want to be a better student." Nancy agrees and posits that not feeling "connected" to the campus is a problem. "In high school everyday they were trying to tell you things. I knew the campus kind of cared but here there's not a lot of that." Josie dreams about a "life coach" for each student, someone who not only lends individuals support but "pushes" and "makes it important."

**Making sense of race.** Of the five Yes, I can narratives, three of the students did mention race in some interesting ways. During the interview, Joshua laughed as he said “I’m white. It doesn’t really help me.” He mused that he is “one of those people that doesn’t pay attention to that kind of thing. I’ve never really had a problem any way or the other with any professor or any student.” In this section’s opening poem Joshua refers to the stereotype of Asian intellectual superiority and insists no one race is more intelligent than another. His ideal college would bring diverse people’s strengths together, something he considers “really important.” Likewise, Kim, who is Vietnamese, dreams of a college that has “diversity of culture on campus” and translators for multiple languages. And Josie, who is Filipina, agrees, “I know that sounds kind of political but I think it’s important to have that diversity, especially people you wouldn’t normally see at a four year university.” When I asked Josie to tell me more about these people, she said, “You know like more minorities and like lower economically privileged people.” Believing “what makes it great is the diversity,” Josie says she can understand why there are so many pro-affirmative action lawsuits.

None of the Yes, I can narratives allude to the kinds of racialized experiences on campus encountered by other low-income high achievers previously described in this chapter. Rather, Joshua, Kim and Josie uphold campus diversity as an ideal, hinting at the general cultural concept of inclusive, racially and ethnically diverse college environments. While Joshua refutes the mythmaking of Asian superiority, he purports to pay little attention to race and believes race is not a factor in his college-going experience. On the other hand, Josie is clearly cognizant of the ways our membership in certain racial groups frequently determine our access to resources, including educational

opportunities. As they talk about race within the college context, students create plausible and subjective explanations based on their cultural values, the generalizations they make about themselves and others, and their interactions as social actors within the communities to which they belong.

### **Summary of Yes, I can Narratives**

Unlike their fellow high-achievers in this study, Joshua, Josie, Leo and Nancy display what can be described as staggering levels of self-confidence in their ability to achieve academically. While the Yes, I can narratives contain such an overriding sense of persona, their stories should not be misinterpreted to mean the institution itself plays a lesser role in their sensemaking. On the contrary, details about positive and negative forms of teacher-student or counselor-student interaction and how they affect these students' persistence underscore the idea that the institution "triggers" students' sensemaking about roles and relationships (Weber & Glynn, 2006). Indeed, these four students identify one institutional impediment to their success that has been reiterated by the participants across this collection of narratives; that is, the role of the classroom teacher. Joshua's poem attests to the heightened impact caring faculty have on students' educational trajectories but also the negative consequences to highly self-motivated students' academic outcomes when the faculty are disengaged and uncaring.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the interplay between the institution and the students' sensemaking foregrounds students' perceptions about empowering and disempowering practices, the roles they assume, the nature of relationships with institutional actors, and how students characterize their successful persistence within the social and cultural worlds of the

community college. Whether the students are immigrants, second-chancers, legacy-leavers or confident directors of their fate, all the high-achieving, low-income students in this study enjoin us to consider the ways a plethora of institutional factors can dash or sustain students' dreams of an education.

Taken as a whole, the three data sets point to several key characteristics of this high-achieving, low-income community college student phenomenon. If I could paint the students' educational dreams in different colors, I would end up with a canvas of many hues. Each color represents important aspects of the education picture, the personal, the institutional, and the societal compositions of light. Although they can be drawn separately, they are, of course, intersecting wavelengths. Those surveyed and interviewed all inform us of real, lived experiences with economic adversity. I would have to paint these images in opaque colors, for negotiating poverty while pursuing an education is, for these students, like securing safe passage through dimly-lit hallways leading to many dead ends, a gloomy undertaking indeed. Based on the findings here, the importance of budgetary support for life-sustaining programs like Extended Opportunity Program Services, Freshman Year Experience, and others cannot be underestimated. Not only do they provide financial support, they also help to create a sense of community. The societal light must be acknowledged here, for funding depends upon the state and the government's commitment to educating all the people.

Illuminating this passageway is the presence of institutional agents, counselors, faculty, and others, whose key interventions help guide the students' way. Painted in luminous light, they truly make the difference in students' successful persistence. Radiantly visible among them are classroom faculty, many who serve roles as mentors or

empowerment agents. These nurturing connections encouraged academic excellence, led to opportunities to conduct and present research, as well as to procuring jobs and internships. Flickering like fireflies are the peers, individuals who seem to play a more limited, less supportive role in community college students' success narratives.

The passageway now grows murky, as all the data point to institutional impediments to students' success. Presenting intricate challenges are assessment practices that direct students off the main pathway to nebulous detours along remedial alleyways. Should they survive and find their way back onto the main path, as all the data show, dreadful classroom experiences with unsympathetic and discouraging faculty often yield dismal academic outcomes, despite students' determined attempts to continue along the path.

Some interviewees also emphasized that, for students of color, the path grows dim when encountering a negative campus racial climate. Although the high-achieving, low-income individuals being studied here demonstrated resistance to these challenges, the institution's role in creating positive learning environments is especially vivid when considering the counter-narratives of students of color. Witnesses to racism and discrimination as continuing social problems in the United States, these students voice hope that realizing individual academic success will effect structural change. Again, the personal, institutional and societal lights converge.

In Chapter 7, I summarize study findings, discuss the study's contributions to existing research and theory, and present implications for community college policy reform and for further research.



## CHAPTER 7: Conclusion

As I neared completion of this study, a friend asked me if there is some individual quality common to all the disadvantaged community college high-achievers that accounts for their “beat the odds” phenomenon. I was anticipating this question. Are these students perhaps more resilient compared to other poor, first-generation, immigrant, and underrepresented college students? Is their success explained largely by certain personal attributes, such as their hard work and determination, rather than by their experiences in the educational institutions they attended?

As an immigrant to America, I, like so many others before me, became well-versed in the tenets of the American Dream. A good student of the “hidden curriculum,” I am keenly aware of the pervasive belief in self-reliance and the work ethic as the catalysts for sparking change in one’s personal circumstances. It is a running commentary underlying much of popular culture. We want to celebrate these inspiring heroes who overcome poverty, who are born in log cabins and become president. Unfortunately, such an ideological stance can lead to deficit-based thinking about disadvantaged populations who do not triumph against the odds. The achievement gap between more advantaged groups such as Whites and Asians and less advantaged groups, such as African Americans and Latino(a)s is then explained via this deficit framework. The racial wealth gap in America means people of color are disproportionately represented in low-income brackets. Lacking economic capital, the poor are seen as not possessing the cultural and social capital they need to succeed in school. However, the relationship between academic outcomes and individual agency is more complex than can be accounted for by an ideological orientation glorifying individual industriousness

as the primary catalyst for change while simultaneously ignoring the interrelated social structures that derail so many of the poor's hopes and dreams.

When we use the word “resilient” as an adjective describing an individual, it can lead to the false notion that resilience is an innate characteristic, possessed by the lucky, persistent, disadvantaged achievers in this study. But, in my view, resilience is not a trait we are born with, it is a skill we must hone across a wide variety of cultural and social settings. As we respond to challenges, we are at times more or less resilient, depending on many factors. Voiced across the narratives in this study is the students' sensemaking about their academic achievement. They emphasize the considerable impact interactions with others have on their persistence, not the sense of achievement attained as a result of greater individual resilience. Hence, resilience is not an innate characteristic propelling disadvantaged community college students to be high-achievers. Nor is it a skill that the students have honed so perfectly that they apply it successfully at all times throughout their personal and academic journeys. Rather, they are at times more or less resilient, more or less persistent, as they negotiate economic and social inequalities within multiple, changing contexts.

As I interrogate why we so often return to the power of the individual to overcome the odds, I recognize the extreme hold the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” value system still has on the American psyche. We have forgotten the details of the true Horatio Alger story. Alluded to often, Alger represents many Americans' perception of the individual's escape from poverty via sheer determination and hard work. In truth, Alger's impoverished characters were rescued by wealthy benefactors. The true Horatio Alger story is not one of individual resilience, the ideology that feeds

the myth of meritocracy. It is a story of privilege and oppression. It is a story of social and institutional barriers to agentic power. And it is a story about how the individual's navigation of those barriers is more successful when key interventions occur. The next section reiterates this study's goals, design, and findings, which reinforce the important role that institutions play in individuals' academic journeys. A discussion of this study's contributions to extant research and a proposal for new theoretical directions follow.

### **Study Goals and Design**

The goal of this study was to better understand what characterizes the experiences of high-achieving, low-income community college students who are "beating the odds." Adding to current research on community college student academic performance patterns, this study investigated the range of social, interactional, and organizational factors that mediate the relationship between the academic experiences of high-achieving, disadvantaged two-year college students and their scholastic success. At the heart of this inquiry was student voice, particularly how these beat-the-odds students made sense of their postsecondary life.

The following questions guided my study:

1. How do high-achieving, low-income students make sense of the educational opportunities and obstacles they encounter at the community college?
2. To what extent do relational ties (with faculty, peers, or other actors) contribute to or impede the persistence of high-achieving, low-income community college students?
3. What is the range of social and organizational factors that mediate the relationship between the academic experiences of high-achieving, low-income students and their successful persistence within a community college context?

In order to address these questions, I conducted a qualitative study that draws from the literature on sensemaking, institutional actors and agents, social capital, critical race theory and critical social work theory. To understand better what characterizes the experiences of low-income, high-achievers, I analyzed the data collected from an online student survey and twenty-five individual, semi-structured student interviews. Included in the analysis are the data from three community college counselor interviews. From the same site as this study, these three counselors provided their perspectives on organizational factors constraining or supporting student success.

### **Summary of Findings and Contributions to Research and Theory**

**Overview of results.** This study focused on the perspectives and experiences of low-income, high-achieving community college students in order to better understand the impediments and supports characterizing their success. An analysis of survey and interview data highlighted a number of economic circumstances and institutional conditions that hinder or help students' persistence. Narrative evidence pointed to the existence of four experience patterns: The Immigrant Story, The Second Chance, Leaving a Legacy, and Yes, I Can. These are described in detail in Chapter 6. Common across these patterns was the considerable role of the faculty in either supporting or thwarting student success. A noticeable difference within the collection of narratives is that compared to other participants, students of color encounter both subtle and overt forms of racism and discrimination.

**Perspectives: What the institution does well.** The students in this study say that several specific institutional factors contributed to their success. Support programs such as Extended Opportunity Program Services (EOPS), Freshman Year Experience (FYE).

Disabled Student Program Services (DSPS) and Counseling facilitated students' success by helping them to negotiate difficult economic and personal hardships. While the Board of Governors grant program helped students manage tuition and fees, financial assistance in the form of book stipends, public transportation passes, and academic supplies were highly valued supports for student success. The true cost of attending community colleges as evidenced in other research (Dowd, 2003) came to the foreground as students described their financial challenges. Caring mentors, counselors and guides often functioned as instrumental institutional or empowerment agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2010). Playing a primary role in student success were engaged and empathetic teachers who provided specific types of assistance in goal-setting, maintaining focus, and confidence-building, at the same time as they skillfully created positive learning environments. These specific forms of guidance are also apparent in current research affirming the important role the institution can play in boosting student success through personalized coaching and decision-making assistance (Park, Cerven, Nations, & Nielsen, 2013; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005).

**Perspectives: What the institution can improve.** For low-income students, increasing financial assistance, particularly for expenses associated with going to school would, of course, be of great value. However, when it comes to nonmonetary institutional barriers to student success, this study found substantial problems within three areas: the placement system, the remediation system, and teaching practices. Counselors and students alike voiced concerns over inaccurate placement and prolonged time spent in unfruitful remedial course completion efforts. The California community colleges have attempted to improve student retention and transfer rates by increasing mandatory

placement and spending millions on basic skills education, but these efforts have not improved students' academic outcomes or completion rates (Gándara, Alvarado, Driscoll, & Orfield, 2012).

As has been noted, the presence of relationships and bonds formed with institutional agents sustained students' academic efforts; conversely, much narrative evidence repeated detailed descriptions of disengaged faculty and negative teaching environments as blocking or forestalling students' academic progress. The important role of classroom faculty in student persistence has been well-documented (Braxton, 2008; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005).

Negative campus racial climates and stereotyping were cited as challenges for students of color in this study. Their counter-narratives reveal certain strategies used to deal with the racial tensions experienced on campus. These include harnessing the power of various forms of "community cultural wealth" (Yosso, 2005), such as drawing from familial and resistant forms of capital in order to confront these conflicts.

**Beyond individual and institutional theoretical explanations.** Theoretical frameworks that take into account the ways racialized, gendered and classed individual beings make sense of their experiences and interactions with others bring to the fore the myriad economic and personal challenges facing today's community college students. Scrutinizing the specific roles some individuals, such as institutional actors and empowerment agents, play within this social context further contributes to our understanding of this high-achieving, low-income phenomenon. Building on these theoretical frameworks, I propose a schematic for understanding multiple socio-economic and cultural aspects affecting students' academic outcomes. Focused outward past

individual faces and toward the wider social environment, this schematic proposes to encapsulate a more holistic appraisal of the community college educational enterprise. This heuristic can help us assess more finely the intra-institutional and extra-institutional aspects that foster or inhibit scholastic success. When students say the professor's role is paramount in their success, that individual professor is part of an entire system. The system is permeated throughout with multiple identities, cultures, communication differences and structural factors. The conceptual model I am describing here goes beyond delineation of certain perceived professor attitudes and behaviors and attempts to discern the presence of other mediating variables playing roles in the success stories of low-income students. Theoretically bridging the separate foci on individual and institutional explanations for student failure or success helps us conduct a more systematic evaluation of the community colleges' effectiveness.

**Complexifying issues of origins and capital.** Some researchers (Henderson & Berla, 1994) have assembled compelling evidence connecting a higher degree of parental involvement in their children's education to gains in achievement. In addition, studies of first-generation college students reveal that students whose parents have no college-going experience are far less likely to attend college than their peers (Berkner & Chavez, 1997). Such studies have long-term implications for academic success. Displayed in Chapter 6, the narratives of adult community college students recount personal struggles with issues they say stem from childhood home backgrounds and circumstances. Casual remarks from 16 of the 25 participants indicated that their parents did not go to college. However, this study's findings offer a different perspective on the far-reaching impact of the individual's home environment.

Looking across the collection of narratives, I noticed how often students' economic and other personal adversities resulted in early childhood and high school experiences largely absent of familial involvement. Lack of involvement was due to a variety of reasons. As shown in Chapter 6, the deaths, serious illnesses, and absences of parents were reported by participants across all thematic categories (Miguel, Whitney, Sylvia, Justine, and Joshua). Some participants (Barry, Leo, Angelina) revealed home environments with lowered parental expectations for academic achievement. Parents presumed their children had lesser abilities or would prioritize work because of economic necessity. Still others (Anne, Kevin, Ernest, and Curtis) describe family lives disengaged from their elementary and high school educational experiences, experiences characterized by frequent school absences, lower academic performance and the failure to complete high school.

Some may assume, then, these "beat-the-odds" students transcended such circumstances because of their exceptional capacity to self-motivate and through sheer hard work. They further assume that these personal traits enabled them to achieve despite homes marked by a lack of access to academic capital and lesser parental engagement during early education experiences. However, most of the students did not tout any extraordinary abilities on their part to navigate community college life. They were unabashedly honest about fluctuating levels of motivation, plaguing issues with low self-esteem, and variable degrees of focus on academics, at times necessitating withdrawal and later re-entry to college. And, across the narratives, the recurring motif emphasized the quality of the interactions while in academic settings as a strong indicator



of continuing, successful persistence. It is the professor's role that loomed large in this chronicle of college student success.

This study's narrative evidence suggests the growing body of literature (Hill & Tyson, 2009) associating parental involvement and home background with school achievement can be complexified further. The importance of such research in illuminating the significance of families' roles in promoting achievement, including exploring the specific types of involvement that are more or less effective, cannot be underestimated. Nonetheless, theories that focus on parental involvement and academic capital deficits within individual home environments, especially the homes of the poor, may neglect to consider fully the considerable impact of the institution's role in promoting academic success throughout one's life. While no one theory can explain why some low-income students fail or succeed in college, this dissertation shows the value of extending the conversation to include deeper analysis of the wider interplay of individual and institutional forces playing a role in student success. In Chapter 4, for example, surveyed students' comments about their individual experiences with teaching faculty bring to the fore the institution's responsibility to provide quality teaching. Probing further the craft of teaching itself, faculty perceptions about professional development and the institutional culture's role in promoting quality teaching could yield further insights about intersecting individual and institutional aspects. Another example is that of the community college counselors in Chapter 5 who described the value of interventions by institutional representatives, especially those connected to student support services programs. Examining information pathways within the institution to determine how individual students gain information about existing resources could help

broaden the discussion. As a final example, I would point to the counter-narratives in Chapter 6, in which students described their individual resistance to deficit-based stereotypes and their experiences with racism on campus. Considering how these individual experiences merge with institutional elements, such as the role of campus leaders in addressing issues of diversity, the institution's role in exploring ties with the community, and diversity requirements for graduation, to name a few, could expand dialogue and analysis.

### **Implications for Institutional Policies and Practices**

**Institutional outreach.** What can the community college do to respond to the students' expressed need for greater intervention? Given these findings, the California community college must renew its historically democratizing mission by bolstering personalized outreach, mentorship, advising, and internship opportunities, a system of support that economically disadvantaged students of all backgrounds voice as integral to their success. To solidify and extend the fine work already being done by many institutional and empowerment agents, enhanced funding is needed for programs aimed at serving the most disadvantaged students, especially the Extended Opportunity Program Services (EOPS).

**Reforming placement and remediation systems.** Reforming placement procedures and classroom assessment techniques are steps toward improving students' academic outcomes. Some research has emphasized the importance of aligning college and high school assessments (Brown & Niemi, 2007); while others suggest a complete overhaul is necessary of what appears to be an unnecessary focus on remediation (Sparks, 2013). Using multiple measures (high school course completion, educational histories,

etc.) for initial course placement, allowing counselors more flexibility in placement decisions, and permitting student self-selection in English and math could better support student success.

**Faculty engagement and professional education.** In addition, community college faculty must play a more engaged role in promoting student success. Renewed emphasis on coaching and counseling skills, one set of criteria used in standard community college faculty evaluation instruments, could generate in-service training opportunities, perhaps conducted by counseling faculty. Moreover, professional education efforts need to prioritize training faculty on how to create encouraging and inclusive classroom climates, how to ramp up advising efforts and set up peer networks, and how to improve classroom assessment techniques.

**Increased attention to campus climate and diversity.** Reforms aimed at infusing diversity across the curriculum, providing cultural sensitivity training to college personnel, conducting campus-wide dialogue and educational workshops that place diversity within a social and historical context, and building specific and strategic mentoring programs for these populations can better address these students' needs. Greater, more supportive and strategic intervention is needed for California's Black and Latino(a) community college students. Colleges ignore the plight of historically underserved populations at the state economy's peril. The changing demographics in California, where Latino(a)s are expected to be in the plurality by 2014, means much is at stake for the community colleges.

### **Implications for Further Research**

Students' detailed reflections about the catalyzing role community college faculty

play in their successful persistence necessitates further research. A larger ethnographic study, inclusive of both high-achieving and struggling students, can further investigate the nature of their collegiate experiences. In addition, I am interested in conducting longitudinal research on this study's participants. To the best of my knowledge, there has been no longitudinal study on high-achieving, low-income community college students. Incorporating the holistic approach I have proposed as a part of future research on community college students is another avenue to pursue. A wide-ranging investigation of placement test practices and basic skills education can help elucidate multiple variables influencing community college students' academic success. Problematic placement tests can be assessed more systemically, examining perhaps the cultural, economic and political dimensions behind the mandatory testing juggernaut. Looking at remedial instructional activities in particular as the unit of analysis could help us better understand the routines, goals, and relationships that support or constrain students' successful persistence.

In addition, more study is needed on college faculty education programs. The minimum qualifications for teaching at a California community college require a master's degree in the specific discipline or a bachelor's degree in the discipline with a master's degree in a related field, as determined by the Academic Senate of the California Community Colleges (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2013). Besides providing training for subject matter mastery, many Master's degree programs often lead to teaching careers at any of the 122 California community colleges. Since the California Community College Teaching Credential was dissolved in 1990 (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2013), graduate teacher education policy

makers could investigate the possibilities of incorporating a community college teaching credential program. Such a program could educate graduate students interested in community college teaching about effective teaching practices, socio-economic and cultural issues, and educational equity concerns.

Since the men and women of color in this study have indicated that race is intrinsically tied to their educational experiences, it bears examining further the perspectives of marginalized groups as they navigate college life in pursuit of their dreams. A larger study of colleges' racial climates and of institutional policies and practices that appear to defuse or perpetuate racist behavior and attitudes can advance our understanding of such issues and perhaps lead to positive change.

### **Final Thoughts**

All of the students I interviewed displayed determination, valued the power education had to make a difference in their lives, and invested much time and energy to realize their dreams of academic achievement. Viewed through the ideological lens of the American Dream, this high-achieving, low-income student phenomenon can be seen as evidence that individual doggedness is key to their achievement. However, this study does not support such an interpretation. The students themselves describe turning points and catalyzing incidents, important interventions by others within the institution, that contribute to their success. With honesty and sincerity, they describe disempowering institutional practices, structures, and environments. They contend with stressful, personal issues and financial impediments to their success. Despite the obstacles they name, they have been tenacious, but they have also benefited greatly, and stayed on course, due to key interactions with others.

It is time to expose the Horatio Alger story for what it is – a myth that maintains the status quo, for as long as we insist upon meritocratic judgments about the nation’s poor, we abnegate full responsibility as a society to educate all of our citizens. As Rose has poignantly posted on a recent blog (2013), “The further question to ask – and we need to keep asking it – is whether it is fair or moral in the United States of America that a young person should have to expend superhuman effort to complete a standard, even basic, education that will in the end benefit both him and society.”

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## APPENDIX A: Student Survey Questions

### Community College Student Survey

Thank you for participating in this survey! The results will be kept strictly confidential.

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your current GPA?
4. What is your primary mode of transportation to school? Check only one--the way you get to school most of the time:
  - a. walk
  - b. bus
  - c. my own car
  - d. my parents drop me off
  - e. carpooling with my friends who drive to school
  - f. OTHER
5. How many units were you enrolled in your first semester at this college?
6. How many units are you currently enrolled in at this college?
7. What was the first English course you enrolled in?
8. What was the first Math course you enrolled in?
9. Did you feel the placement test placed you correctly into your first English course?
10. Did you feel the placement test placed you correctly into your first Math course?
11. Check all that apply: Which of the following, have you participated in: freshman year experience; a workshop conducted by a counselor; a workshop at the transfer center; a workshop conducted by the Honors program; a workshop conducted by the EOPS program
12. Check all that apply: when you study, do you study:
  - a. alone
  - b. with a friend
  - c. with a study group
  - d. at the library
  - e. at the tutoring center
  - f. other
13. In general, how many hours do you typically study per week? 0, 1-3, 4-6, 7+
14. Have you ever visited the tutoring center for an appointment with a tutor? Yes or no, page break, if yes....How would you rate the tutoring center services? 5=extremely helpful 1=not at all helpful
15. What has been your most challenging course thus far?
16. What made the class so challenging? Check all that apply:
  - a. tests
  - b. essay exams
  - c. classroom learning activities
  - d. class size
  - e. difficult course material

- f. professor
  - g. OTHER
17. Of all those challenging aspects, which ONE was the most challenging?
  18. Please explain why you found that ONE aspect the most challenging.
  19. What has been the most satisfying class you have taken thus far?
  20. Repeat 14.
  21. Repeat 16.
  22. Do you have a mentor/guide/advisor who helps you in your role as a student?  
Yes, no, page break. If yes, Tell me a little bit about your mentor. Who is he or she? What are some ways your mentor has helped you with college?
  23. How many times during a semester do you meet professors during office hours?  
0, 1 – 3, 4-6, 7+
  24. How much do you agree with the following statement? My professors at this college have treated me with respect. Scale of 1(strongly disagree) -5 (strongly agree)
  25. Have you had any negative experiences with faculty? Yes or no
  26. How many times during a semester do you meet with a counselor? 0, 1, 2, 3, 4+
  27. Did your counselor help you create an Education Plan? Yes or no
  28. How much do you agree with the following statement? My counselors have treated me with respect. Scale of 1(strongly disagree) -5 (strongly agree)
  29. Have you had any negative experiences with counselors?
  30. Do you belong to any student clubs? Yes, page break to name the clubs. No
  31. Which of the following do you consider obstacles you must deal with while you are a student at this college? Check all that apply:
    - a. I am a single parent.
    - b. I have to find childcare so I can go to school.
    - c. I do not get enough financial aid to enroll full-time.
    - d. I cannot afford the cost of books and school supplies.
    - e. I do not have a high school diploma.
    - f. I work full-time.
    - g. I do not have a computer at home.
    - h. I do not have a printer at home.
  32. How would you rate the climate on this campus? 5 = extremely welcoming - 1= not at all welcoming
  33. Do you belong to any blogs or social networking sites, like Facebook, Ning, or MySpace? Yes, no, page break, do you feel that any of these sites help you with school?
  34. How confident are you that you can find information about the following services on campus? 5-extremely easy 1= extremely difficult
    - Admissions
    - Clubs
    - Counseling
    - Events on Campus
    - Financial Aid
    - Study Groups

Tutoring

Using the Library

35. Have you ever taken a semester off from college?

## **APPENDIX B: Community College Counselor Interview Protocol**

1. Can you talk a bit about your history with this district (time you've been here, different positions you've had)?
2. How is this campus different from other community colleges in this area, say Southwestern, Grossmont, or Cuyamaca?
3. We're interested in studying high school students' transitions from high school to post-secondary education. What role, if any, do you think the community college should play in helping students with this transition?
4. Can you tell me about the EOPS program's goals?
5. What are the approaches you use to help meet your program's goals?
6. From your experience, what are students' goals when they first arrive? Do you have any sense that their goals change while they're here? If so, why do you think their goals change?
7. How much contact do you get to have with individual students?
8. What are some ways students have benefited from their participation in EOPS?
9. Can you talk a bit more about how this program supports student success?
10. What further resources or support do you think are needed to enhance the success of your program?
11. How would you characterize the strengths and weaknesses of the counseling department?
12. How would you characterize the campus' academic strengths and weaknesses?
13. Can you talk a bit about assessment and course placement? How do these processes work or not work?
14. Who are the other important people or programs to help students achieve their goals here?
15. In your time here, have the approaches changed at all in terms of how this campus tries to help students with their completion/success rates?
16. How well prepared do you think students are when they arrive at this campus?
17. What are some reasons you think some students don't meet their goals here?
18. Some studies show that community college completion rates and transfer rates need a lot of improvement. What do you think this campus needs to do to help its students achieve their goals, whether it be certificate, completion or transfer?
19. Are there specific populations that need more intervention? If so, what do you think needs to happen to help them succeed?
20. Have there been cuts to resources to support students?

## **APPENDIX C: Informed Consent for Participation in Research**

¡Sí se puede!: Community College Students who Beat the Odds

Principal Investigator: Carmen Jay

Carmen Jay, a graduate student in the Education Studies department at the University of California, San Diego, is conducting a research study to examine the academic success of community college students. You have been identified to participate in this study because you are an Honors student in the EOPS program or in the Honors Program at the college where the study will be conducted. There will be approximately 25 student participants in this study.

This form is to seek your permission to participate in a study on the factors that contribute to the success of Honors students. The study is being conducted as part of the Educational Doctoral Program in Teaching and Learning at the University of California, San Diego. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of high-achieving two year college students.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview lasting 60 minutes or less. Your interview will be audiorecorded and transcribed. You will be able to view and assess the accuracy of the interview transcription. I will audiorecord your responses to the interview questions during interview sessions lasting approximately 60 minutes. You can stop and/or erase the recording at any time. An example of a question that would be asked in the interview is: “What advice would you give someone from your neighborhood who is going to be a student at this college soon?” Audiorecordings will be kept strictly confidential, available only to me for the purpose of analysis. I will not share audiorecordings with employees within the district. If I ever use the audiorecordings at professional conferences, the likelihood that you will be recognized is very minimal. You have the option to have the audio recordings destroyed by me at the conclusion of the study or allow me to use them in presentations of the study.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There are no consequences or penalties of any kind if you decide you do not want to participate. Participation in this study in no way affects your relationship with the researcher, with Miramar College, or with the San Diego Community College District. Your choice to participate or not to participate will have no bearing on your student status. If you agree to participate, you will be compensated for your time with a \$15 Amazon.com gift card at the completion of the study.

There is no additional benefit for participating in this study. Your participation, however, will contribute to research on high-achieving community college students. Your participation could contribute to future policy and program changes.

There is a minor risk of stress, discomfort, fatigue and boredom. However, you have the right to skip or decline to answer any question that is asked, to take a break if needed, and to end your participation at any time. There is a small possibility of a loss of confidentiality in this study. However, your interview will be kept strictly confidential, available only to me for purpose of analysis. Your name will not appear on any transcripts resulting from the interview. Your name and identity will remain confidential in any publications or discussions. Your identity will also remain anonymous to the transcriptionist when the interviews are transcribed. The transcriptions will be kept in a password protected file or in a locked cabinet for the duration of the study. Research records will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. Research records may be reviewed by the UCSD Institutional Review Board and faculty of the UCSD Education Studies Program. Per your preference indicated on the audio recording consent forms, transcripts will either be used for future educational purposes or destroyed upon completion of the study. Because this is a research study, there may also be some unknown risks that are currently unforeseeable. You will be informed of any significant new findings.

It is your right to decline to answer any question that is asked, and you are free to end interviewing, and/or audio recording at any time. You do not have to participate in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in this study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. If you choose to drop out of the study all information obtained from you will be deleted from the study.

The PI may remove you from the study without your consent if the PI feels it is in your best interest or the best interest of the study. You may also be withdrawn from the study if you do not follow instructions given you by the study personnel.

There will be no cost to you for participating in this study.

By signing below you indicate that Carmen Jay has explained this study, answered your questions, and that you voluntarily grant your consent, which can be withdrawn at any time, for participation in this study. If you have any questions about this study or research-related problems you may reach the principle investigator Carmen Jay, at (619) 388-7532, or at [cajay@ucsd.edu](mailto:cajay@ucsd.edu). Also, questions about the study can be addressed to her advisor, Dr. Amanda Datnow, [adatnow@ucsd.edu](mailto:adatnow@ucsd.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may also contact the Institutional Review Board at the University of California, San Diego Human Research Protections Program at (858) 455-5050.

I agree to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

You have received a copy of this consent document to keep.

**APPENDIX D: Audiorecording Recording Release Form**

¡Sí se puede!: Community College Students who Beat the Odds

Principal Investigator: Carmen Jay

Audiorecordings will be made of you during your participation in this research project. Please indicate below the uses of these audiorecordings to which you are willing to consent. This is completely voluntary and up to you. In any use of the audiorecordings, your name will not be identified and your identity will be kept anonymous. You may request to stop the recording at any time or to erase any portion of your recording.

1. The audiorecordings can be studied by the research team for use in the research project.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Initial

2. The audiorecordings can be used for scientific publications.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Initial

3. The audiorecordings can be reviewed in classrooms by students for educational purposes.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Initial

4. The audiorecordings can be reviewed at meetings of scientists interested in the study of education and educational practice.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Initial

You have the right to request that the audiorecording be stopped or erased during the recording.

You have read the above description and give your consent for the use of audiorecordings as indicated above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Carmen Jay, (619) 388-7532 or cajay@ucsd.edu



## APPENDIX E: Student Interview Protocol

### Introduction:

- Begin with a few minutes of explaining the study, who I am and the purpose of speaking with the students. Review the consent form and give them a copy.
- Give them a general overview of the topics I'll be covering so they have a sense of what is coming. Also, let them know the approximate length of the interview and ask if they have any specific questions before beginning. STRESS that I am interested in understanding their experiences, opinions, and knowledge—i.e. there are no right or wrong answers. Also, let them know that if the question doesn't make sense to them, they should feel free to say, "I don't understand the question" and STRESS that we may have worded it badly.
- Explain that while the interview will be taped, their responses are strictly CONFIDENTIAL. Let them know if there is something they would like to say off tape, they can inform me and the recorder will be shut off for their comment.
- Throughout the interview, if they seem reluctant to answer a question, remind them if they don't feel comfortable answering, I can skip it and move on to the next one.
- If I see I am running out of time, I will signal to the participant that the interview is about to come to an end (e.g.), "You've been really great/patient about answering all our questions and I really appreciate it. I want to be mindful about your time, so I just have a couple of wrap-up questions I would like to ask before we finish the interview."

1. How long have you been a student at San Clemente? Why did you choose San Clemente? Did you consider other places?
2. Did you always think you would go to college? Please tell me about when you decided you wanted to go to college. What influenced your decision?
3. The first semester of college can be very challenging. Think back to your first semester at the community college. Tell me a bit about what it was like. What do you find most memorable?
4. Please tell me about your typical day on campus now. How has it changed for you?
5. Please tell me about your background. Is there anything about your background that you feel affects your experiences as a college student?
6. Is there someone or something that encourages you to stay in school? Tell me something about anyone or anything that motivates you to stay in school.
7. Paying for books is one financial issue for many students. What are you most concerned about when it comes to managing the expenses associated with going to school?
8. What would you say is the biggest hurdle you have overcome while you have been a college student?
9. Many college students say they have had at least one positive experience with someone on campus. Can you tell me something about the positive experiences you have had here?
10. Is there someone on campus you feel very comfortable talking to about your academic or personal concerns? Tell me a bit about the people you communicate

with about your experiences here. Do you know anyone at San Clemente who goes out of their way to help you? Why do you think they go out of their way to help you?

11. Sometimes college students have negative experiences on campus. Please tell me something you have found to be difficult here.
12. Have you ever met with one of our counselors? How did you feel about the experience? Can you describe your experiences with counselors?
13. Some students prefer to study alone or with a tutor, some love study groups, and others come up with all kinds of creative ways to study. What have you found to be some effective ways to study? Have you been involved in getting some study groups going?
14. It seems that just about everyone on campus has a Facebook or Myspace page. Do you use the Internet for anything connected to school? Tell me about any online places that are useful to you as a student.
15. Let's dream for a moment. Imagine your ideal college campus. What would the campus be like? How would you describe the professors, the classes, the counselors, the students, anything at all that would make it a great place to be a college student?
16. What has been your most satisfying class so far? What made it such a good experience?
17. What has been your most disappointing class so far? What made it such a bad experience?
18. What advice would you give someone from your neighborhood who is going to be a freshman at this college soon?
19. Congratulations on having earned such a fine GPA at this college! What strategies or actions have you taken to help you succeed here? What more could the campus do to help you keep succeeding?
20. Is there anything else you'd like to share about the people or things that are a part of your success here?

## **APPENDIX F: Descriptive and Analytic Code Lists Grouped by Thematic Categories**

### **Sensemaking about the self and interactions within the community college**

- low/high self-esteem
- feelings of insecurity
- self as confident
- self as leader
- beliefs about the self
- attitudes about going to college
- reasons for going to college
- perception of one's personality
- cultural influences
- role as a student
- expectations about peer behaviors
- sense of belonging
- perceived opportunities
- perceived obstacles or hurdles to success
- gender as an obstacle
- age as an obstacle
- age as a motivating factor in college success
- role of military in preparation for college
- coping strategies
- lack of family involvement
- presence of family support
- love of learning
- personal determination
- adjusting to setbacks
- past education experiences
- work experiences
- sense of preparation or lack of preparation for college
- purpose of college
- value of practical knowledge
- meaning of academic success
- class as marker of status
- education for re-entry to workforce
- education as means to attain status
- desire for challenging curriculum
- desire for diverse curriculum
- identity as achiever
- identity construction
- language as a barrier
- culture as a barrier
- need to be focused on school
- psychological stressors

- pride of academic accomplishment
- need for external validation
- desire to be a role model
- desire to effect social change
- altruism
- concerns about physical health
- concerns about mental health
- work ethic
- responsibility to community

### **Poverty**

- social problems
- financial pressure
- job loss
- transportation issues
- single motherhood/fatherhood as a challenge
- homelessness
- education for financial stability/security

### **Successfully navigating community college life**

- focus on community
- naming of socio-political factors affecting college pathway
- overcoming struggles with developmental/remedial education
- overcoming assessment difficulties
- strategies for success
- setting goals
- education as a priority
- knowledge about resources
- knowledge about college procedures/routines
- knowledge about classroom routines
- knowledge about college events
- aspirational capital
- familial capital
- linguistic capital
- navigational capital
- resistant capital
- social capital
- attending workshops
- joining or promoting clubs
- seeking guidance
- balancing full-time school and full-time work
- balancing full-time school and family responsibilities
- managing time constraints
- desire for mentor or coach

--navigating the return to college

**Key/critical interventions as integral to academic success**  
**Important role of student support programs**

- desire for more interaction with peers
- important relationships
- Positive/negative form of communication with peers
- Positive/negative form of communication with counselors
- counselor-student interaction
- expectations about role of counselor
- Bonds with institutional representative
- Familial bonds
- Bonds with peers
- Extended Opportunity Program Services (EOPS) counselor intervention
- Disabled Student Program Services (DSPS) counselor intervention
- critical intervention by peer
- critical intervention by family member
- critical intervention by institutional agent
- critical intervention by empowerment agent
- need for institution to help students navigate college

**Prominent role of the faculty in student success**

- classroom incidents marked by trust
- classroom incidents marked by distrust
- teacher-student classroom interaction
- empowering/disempowering practices
- positive/negative classroom assessment experiences
- teaching practices promoting success
- teaching practices impeding success
- satisfying class experiences
- challenging class experiences
- expectations about role of faculty
- desire for greater interaction with faculty
- key faculty intervention
- desire for more engaged faculty
- desire for caring faculty
- desire for empathetic faculty
- desire for knowledgeable faculty
- desire for encouraging faculty
- rigorous curriculum as promoting success

### **Institutional practices that thwart student success**

- assessment practice issues
- remedial program issues
- desire for greater counselor autonomy in assisting students with placement test problems

### **Institutional/organizational efforts to boost student success**

- importance of Extended Opportunity Program Services
- importance of Freshmen Year Experience
- need for more counselors
- role of faculty in promoting success
- institutional services/resources deemed important

### **Concerns about lack of campus commitment to diversity**

- campus diversity as an ideal
- lack of diversity as a problem
- cultural sensitivity issues
- campus climate
- programs that build community
- social class issue
- interventions needed for underrepresented populations

### **Counternarratives about subtle and overt forms of racism**

#### **Making sense of race**

- immigrant experiences
- experiences with racism on campus
- experiences with racism at work
- experiences with stereotyping
- experiences with inequality
- experiences of isolation
- tactics to deal with discrimination
- equality as an ideal
- race perceived as a factor/not a factor in college pathway

## APPENDIX G: A Found Poem: Angelina's Journey

### Angelina's Journey\*

**\*All names are pseudonyms. For confidentiality purposes, other identifying characteristics have been changed.**

i

I was born in the former USSR.  
My first language is Russian,  
second, Ukrainian,  
English added at grade 6  
but the only thing I learned was  
How do you do?

My mother was afraid for us  
because there was a time  
some people came over  
and tried to take us,  
my sister and me.

Because he owed something.  
My father  
involved in some Mafia  
didn't live with us since I was five.  
He died first,  
well . . . he was killed  
In 87.  
In 88,  
my mom died.

My mom was 40 years old when she died  
of stroke.  
History of disorders, alcohol consumption, major depression  
No way,  
No opportunity.  
If you are born poor,  
you are going to remain poor.  
Single mom, two kids, no help from dad.  
We were picked on in school  
because we were dressed poor.  
No nice clothes,  
No happy memories.

One of the things that drives me  
is I don't want that for my kids.  
I don't want to deprive them  
of something necessary.  
I experienced it firsthand  
I know . . . what it is like.

I was raised Christian orthodox,  
Baptized,  
Prayed in the morning  
Prayed in the evening  
A completely Christian way and lifestyle.  
I didn't know we were Jewish  
until I was twelve.

Because we were hiding it.  
Shocking, but more confusing  
than shocking. You start  
becoming aware of other things,  
like discrimination  
and why your family was hiding.

You become a lot more aware of things.  
I knew  
there were Jewish people.  
I didn't know  
they were discriminated against,  
considered unlucky.

After I found out,  
I read a very graphic book about the Holocaust  
After I found out,  
I started looking into those things.

I learned  
about the involvement of the Russians in the Holocaust.  
And how, they . . . were also killing Jewish people.  
It was not covered in schools there.  
A lot of them killed by Stalin.  
None of that is mentioned.

I learned  
my mom's grandpa was considered missing in action  
from World War 1.  
His body, never found.



But my family was investigating.  
He was actually killed by our own  
because he was Jewish.

I learned  
before the war, from poor  
they started building their own little farm  
and they became rich.  
Soldiers would come  
and take everything away.  
*Everything.*  
Grandma had 6 siblings and only 3 survived.  
They literally kicked them out of their own house  
in the middle of the night  
in the winter.  
So. Only my grandmother and 2 of her siblings survived.  
It gave me more clarity why  
my family was hiding.

## ii

Moving over to the United States,  
My older sister, her son and I in June of 2002  
Straight to Oceanside, a newcomer high school  
I started learning English  
I started working  
but always had bad grades in high school  
because I had to work.

I went to work as a waitress at an American bistro.  
I had to  
pay rent  
pay my bills  
help my sister, a single mom,  
work, independent, since I was 16.  
Sometimes I didn't have money to buy food.  
So. I would buy cabbage and avocado and make salads out of that and eat it for days.  
Don't eat it anymore  
until this day.

I started moving up.  
A friend recommended me,  
a job as a receptionist at a Russian doctor's office  
and because I was a friend, he took me.  
I didn't have any experience

I learned how to take blood pressure  
 I learned how to set up patients  
 I got involved in clinical research.  
 And I really liked it.  
 But . . . I knew I would never go to medical school,  
 too expensive  
 So. I changed my path.

iii

Recruiting, working for Americano Bank, I realized  
 I don't want to do business.  
 Business involves selling things people do not need.  
 I started to resent my work,  
 selling.  
 You couldn't just open a checking account for that single mom.  
 It had to be a savings,  
 a checking,  
 a this and  
 a that.  
 I knew . . .  
 eventually, she'll pay for it.  
 If I didn't do it, I would lose my job.  
 I didn't sleep well at nights.

Went back to the doctor,  
 Part time, then 80 hours a week,  
 Special set of skills, very detail oriented, not everybody can do it  
 But I stopped  
 because there was really no way for me to grow.  
 Relocated to San Diego,  
 cost of living is much cheaper.  
 This college, I'm in it and I'm in it for good.

First class, history.  
 Somebody said the Americans won World War 2.  
 I said, no, the Russians won World War 2.  
 I investigated and saw  
 That nobody won World War 2.  
 It was a combination of countries.  
 I was shocked  
 Because I was taught we won the war.

Here, everybody asks,  
 a lot of people don't know what Ukrainian is.  
 Here, there are a lot of people from Latin America

and African Americans,  
 a kind of rarity there in Ukraine.  
 There, I don't think race or ethnicity comes into factor,  
 But here,  
 Everybody asks.  
 Growing up not knowing any stereotypes, I didn't judge.  
 Here, it's like  
 These people smell like this.  
 These people talk like this.  
 Who am I to judge?  
 Until not very long ago, I didn't even know these people existed.  
 Maybe, it's cultural.

Asked about ethnicity, I had to put I was Jewish  
 Haven't really felt any negativity,  
 except, I guess  
 from Muslims.  
 There is this . . . you can feel the tension.  
 But the tension comes from *their* background.  
 This war,  
 Completely pointless.

I got a more broad perspective.  
 Can't say I hold any grudge or am upset.  
 I look at it as it is.  
 I know that  
 everywhere in the world  
 there's still discrimination against one or another.  
 It's something we have to work on.

Luckily,  
 I had an *amazing* English professor  
 Luckily,  
 I had a professor willing to communicate  
 Luckily,  
 My English was pretty good  
 Luckily,  
 EOPS counselors, a tremendous help,  
 I'm in a really good relationship with them.  
 Luckily,  
 They waived tuition fees.  
 Luckily,  
 The financial aid office helped me appeal.

Now,  
 Involved on campus,  
 I'm tutoring Anatomy  
 What I get out of that is  
 an *amazing* experience  
 Every student needs an individual approach and  
 when you get an *aha!* moment from them,  
 It's the most *amazing* thing.

Now,  
 EOPS, a tremendous help  
 \$100 for books, free paper, scantrons, flashcards--  
 every penny counts.

Guidance from professors  
 Recommendation letters from professors  
 I didn't know about Honors classes,  
 Heard about it from an instructor.  
 I didn't know about scholarships.  
 Heard about it from an instructor.

Counselor told me.  
 (We're able to talk)  
 9 Honors units and  
 if you are accepted,  
 you can be in the San Diego State Honors Program.

Counselor told me.  
 (We're able to talk)  
 I could get an AA in Psychology  
 which I didn't know  
 Nobody else told me that.

Last semester alone,  
 My books were \$800.  
 For certain classes, I'll rent a book  
 But if you buy a used book,  
 It is no use to you,  
 You had to buy that access code.  
 The book is \$16  
 but the access code is \$95.  
 It was mandatory for class.

I do not own a car

I use someone else's  
 but pay for gas.  
 I do not have to pay rent  
 I live with my boyfriend  
 That is one of the reasons I was able to stop working  
 Financial aid helps  
 but it is nearly not enough to support yourself.  
 I cook every day.  
 I bring my lunch from home.

The feeling of being in financial need,  
 all the time,  
 It's very difficult, very challenging.  
 It changes you as a person.  
 Constantly feel . . . that you owe someone.  
 It affects your relationships with other people.  
 I don't pay rent  
 and it makes me very uncomfortable.  
 I can't do anything for my sister and her son.  
 The pressure is high.

v

Sometimes we have to do something  
 we are not completely passionate about  
 because we need the money.  
 The counselor  
 takes his passion  
 actually does something  
 He helps because that is who he is,  
     That's his *passion*.

Not all counselors are at all helpful  
 Or willing to help  
 A lot of tutors don't have their heart in it,  
 Don't communicate with the professors  
 but  
 Studying in groups helps  
 because you bounce ideas off each other.  
 A hundred names for bones,  
 A hundred names for muscle,  
 To remember, we  
 literally created stories,  
 names with similar names  
     I want to learn Latin one day . . .

Took my first Biology class  
 Kept a good relationship with the professor  
 and now,  
 I'm vice president of the science club  
 I want to help him.  
 Teachers should be more respected  
 They have held other positions that were more high paying,  
 But they are here.  
 They are doing this for their *passion*.  
 They volunteer for student clubs, not required to do that. A lot of really good professors  
 tend to work for university  
 very high paying jobs.  
 I think community college professors are as important.  
 It should be as prestigious.

Last semester before an exam,  
 I was a mess,  
 And someone in my class, she said,  
 "Girl, you just gotta take a breather!"  
 And now I'm just calm.  
 For me, it was just *that one phrase*,  
 "Girl, you just gotta take a breather!"

College utopia?  
 Encourage student clubs,  
 Availability of more classes,  
 More EOPS  
 For more students.  
     Everything ties back to finances.

My advice?  
 Know you can do it.  
 Learn from other students.

Students are afraid to speak up.  
 It's very cultural.  
 Help them  
 know they can do it.  
*Believe.*