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Running in Place:
How Work, Family, and Income Instability Keep Students from Finishing Community College

By

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Community colleges have opened up opportunity to millions of Americans, yet most students who begin community college leave without completing what they came for, whether a course, program, or credential. Research has acknowledged that students hold work, family, and financial commitments while in college. However, we lack a clear, fine-grained picture of how students manage these complex obligations, how they exercise agency, and how they survive and succeed (or not) while attending college. This dissertation follows 30 community college students for two years to understand how they manage their competing commitments, how different types of obligations reinforce and interact with one another, and how students believe these processes impact their academic success. I show how family responsibilities and student employment are central to the contemporary community college experience, and how learning about college policies in an unstable institutional environment presents barriers for students in completing their educational goals. These findings suggest a need to understand students as embedded in their roles as workers and members of their households while in college and that policies aimed at improving community college student outcomes should focus on supporting students in managing their multiple roles.

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Introduction

Arianna is a 22-year-old student who graduated from high school in 2014. Her parents, immigrants from Guatemala, never attended college. In her senior year of high school, she was accepted to a four-year state college, but decided not to attend when she realized that her parents—a certified nurse assistant and construction worker—did not earn enough money to afford the tuition.

Arianna enrolled at her local community college instead. She took general education and nursing prerequisites while working 30 to 35 hours a week at a large retail store. But after two years of struggling to enroll in overfilled classes, Arianna decided to leave her local college and moved to Summit View College, another community college, in 2017. Now, she takes care of her brother's two-month-old daughter from 6:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. on weekdays and takes one or two classes a semester in the evenings. After class, she is often too tired to study. Arianna does not have to pay rent at her sister's house where she lives but shares a room with her 12-year-old niece, which poses another impediment to focusing on her schoolwork.

Nonetheless, Arianna is slowly completing her nursing requirements and hopes to apply to a private, for-profit nursing college where she believes she could earn her bachelor's degree in nursing in three years. While a community college nursing program would be cheaper, it is also more uncertain. Arianna sees the private college as a guarantee, "instead of not knowing how long it'll take and then having to rely on my family too long." Despite these challenges, Arianna is committed to earning her nursing degree to improve her financial standing and to help her parents. She reflects, "they have enough to maintain their life. They don't have enough to try and improve it, and it really bugs me....Seeing my parents struggle makes me want to get a good degree, so I can work and help them out, so they don't have to struggle anymore."

Arianna's story is not what typically comes to mind when most Americans imagine "going to college." She has attended multiple two-year colleges, lives at home with her parents and other family, works for pay to support herself, and has significant carework commitments. Yet, in many ways, Arianna is a typical community college student today. She is a first-generation student, a woman, and a racially minoritized student. Like the majority of her classmates, Arianna switches between part-time and full-time status depending on her outside obligations and works significant hours in addition to her academic demands. In line with the aspirations of most community college students today, she ultimately hopes to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree.

While the culturally dominant narrative of college attendance evokes students living on campus, drinking too much on weekends, and graduating from the same institution four years later, this misrepresents what higher education looks like for most American students. Only the minority of students today follow a traditional pathway through college. Today's college student is no longer an 18-year-old recent high school graduate who enrolls full time and has limited work and family commitments. Students today are older, more diverse, and attend school while balancing a complicated set of economic and personal responsibilities with their studies. How do students manage commitments to work and family along with their academic goals? What are the consequences of external responsibilities for students' transitions, trajectories, and pathways through college? How do students maneuver through the difficult circumstances these obligations present, and how do they strategize to stay afloat?

This dissertation addresses these questions by taking a close look at the educational experiences of community college students. I draw on 120 interviews collected with 30 students over the course of two years—the projected time to completion for an associate degree—to

examine how students' work, family, and financial demands affect their ability to complete college. In this dissertation, I argue that external obligations are a central mechanism that shapes students' college experiences, including students' course taking, academic progress, and ultimately completion. This dissertation reveals how employment and family commitments are key to understanding the experiences and success of college students in the contemporary United States. This introductory chapter situates my study by providing a brief history of the expansion of community colleges, reviewing the existing research on college student success and the role of external obligations, and introduces the reader to the students in this study and the methods used to examine their experiences.

Expanding Opportunity: The Growth of the Community College Sector

From their inception, community colleges were designed to be a different type of higher education institution that had a key role to play in reducing social inequality. While the first public junior college opened in 1901, community colleges were not widespread until the middle of the century. At that time, President Harry Truman's Commission on Higher Education published an influential report that created a national rhetoric on higher education policy, emphasizing the key role of community colleges in access, equality, and democracy (Gilbert and Heller 2013; Hutcheson 2007; The President's Commission on Higher Education 1947a). The report called for a massive expansion of higher education, and community colleges were central to achieving the Commission's recommendation because they could be constructed quickly and were more cost effective than four-year colleges (Brubacher and Rudy 1997).

At the time of the report's publishing, college enrollment was still concentrated at four-year colleges with less than ten percent of students enrolled at two-year colleges (Snyder 1993).

The 1950s and 60s marked a major development for community colleges. They expanded

dramatically both in the number of institutions and in student enrollments as the GI bill,

women's entry into the labor market, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and an expanding American

economy drove new groups of students to enter college (Brint and Karabel 1989; Crookston and

Hooks 2012; Dougherty 1988; Dougherty 1994). By 1969, about a quarter of all college students

were enrolled in public two-year colleges (Snyder 1993). By the end of the twentieth century,

more than half of the students in public colleges and universities were enrolled in community

colleges, doubling the enrollment figure from 1969 and opening college opportunity to a large

portion of American society (Snyder 1993).

In line with the vision of the Commission, two-year colleges have significantly expanded

their enrollments. Today, community colleges are the largest sector of higher education. They

enroll millions of students each year. In the fall of 2018, 5.7 million students, 35 percent of all

undergraduates in the country, were enrolled in community colleges (See Table 303.70 in

Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019). However, scholars estimate as many as 44 percent of all

undergraduates attend public two-year colleges when year-round enrollments and community

colleges that award bachelor's degrees are taken into account (Community College Research

Center 2020; Jenkins and Fink 2016). Looking beyond current enrollment, community colleges

play a key role in the postsecondary pathways of today's college students. Among all students

who completed a degree at a four-year college in 2015–16, 49 percent had enrolled at a two-year

college in the previous 10 years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center 2017). At

some point in their higher education journeys, a great many college-goers today are served by

community colleges.

The demographic composition of community college students reflects the Commission's values of broadening opportunity. As a result of their open access and convenience, community colleges enroll segments of the population that had not previously attended college and thus play a vital role in reducing social inequality in the form of the students they attract. Community colleges provide a key point of access to postsecondary education for low-income and racially minoritized students (Jenkins and Fink 2016; Xu, Jaggars, Fletcher, and Fink 2018). Among college students who first enrolled in fall 2010, 49 percent of Black students and 51 percent of Latinx students started at a public two-year college, compared with 36 percent of white students and 38 percent of Asian American students (Shapiro et al. 2017).

Community college students are disproportionately low income: More than a third, 37 percent, of community college students live in households that earn less than $20,000 a year. Thirty percent live in households that earn $20,000 to $49,000 a year, and a third live in households that earn $50,000 a year or more. Students with independent status, who are not claimed as dependents on their parents' or guardians' income tax forms have lower incomes, on average, than dependent students. Nearly half (47 percent) of all independent students have incomes less than $20,000, while nearly half (49 percent) of all dependent students have incomes of $50,000 and higher (Community College Research Center 2020).

Community college students are disproportionately female, with 57.3 percent of students falling into this category, and are also older than students in other sectors of higher education (See Table 303.70 in Snyder et al. 2019). Only about half (54 percent) of community college students are 18 to 25 years old, compared with over three quarters (76 percent) of public four-year undergraduates (See Table 303.50 in Snyder et al. 2019). As a group, community college students are more likely to be low-income, Black or Latinx, female, and over age 25 than the

general college population. The demographic composition of the community college student body seems to reflect the national goal of broadening educational opportunity to all.

Institutional Characteristics of the Community College

By establishing a network of community colleges, the Commission sought to make public higher education equally available to all students regardless of their race, gender, religion, or social class. They emphasized that community colleges were a unique form of postsecondary education that should be available to students regardless of the skills, prior training, and capabilities they brought with them to college, and thus attracted a different kind of student than those who had traditionally attended four-year colleges (Gilbert and Heller 2013). Community college students often lacked the social status and financial resources of four-year college students, as measured by their parents' occupations (Brint and Karabel 1989:44). To accommodate these students, community colleges were designed to be flexible in key ways that are distinct from their four-year counterparts. I point to six dimensions of flexibility embedded in the design of community colleges that are both enabling and restrictive.

First, unlike liberal arts colleges, community colleges were designed to fulfill multiple roles. They offer both vocational and academic degrees, different credential tracks that allow students to transfer to four-year colleges or enter the workforce in a licensed vocation, such as firefighters, auto repair mechanics, computer technicians, electricians, and medical aides (Rosenbaum, Ahearn, and Rosenbaum 2017). In addition to terminal associate degrees and general education for four-year colleges, they are also tasked with serving the community in a variety of other roles, administering adult education programs, offering apprenticeship training, and providing remedial coursework and adult education for students with poor academic skills.

On the one hand, community colleges are positioned as a cost-effective way for students to complete the first two years of a bachelor's degree. On the other, these multiple roles have led some to term the community college as "the contradictory college," with myriad institutional demands that divide resources between academically focused and transfer tracks (Dougherty 1994). Nonetheless, unlike four-year colleges and universities which offer only bachelor's degrees, community colleges provide a range of credential options with different requirements, job prospects, and job rewards.

Second, programs offered at community colleges are designed to serve local labor market needs, so their program offerings are varied and evolve quickly (Brint and Karabel 1989:23). The Truman Commission wanted two-year colleges to be fully integrated into the life of the community—hence the term "community" colleges (Gilbert and Heller 2013). They were designed to engage with the needs of the community and adapt their programs to address local labor market demand (The President's Commission on Higher Education 1947c). The Commission suggested that community colleges should be distributed within the state so they could serve most of the residents through convenient locations including satellite campuses near homes and workplaces. Thus, in contrast to four-year colleges, community colleges were designed to serve students who remained in their local communities both during college and after they graduated.

Third, the flexibility of community colleges holds with respect to admissions standards. Community colleges were founded on an open-access model where students are admitted without regard to their prior academic performance. Unlike the four-year college admissions process, which requires lengthy personal statements, transcripts, and evidence of extracurricular activities, community colleges require the applicant simply enter basic demographic information.

High school transcript information is not used in admissions decisions; in fact, you do not need a high school diploma to enroll in community college. These open admission policies have reduced barriers to entry and made the dream of a college education more attainable for many historically excluded and nontraditional students.

Fourth, community colleges have relatively low tuition compared to four-year colleges. The Truman Commission believed it was the responsibility of the state "to guarantee that financial barriers do not prevent any able and otherwise qualified young person from receiving the opportunity for higher education" (The President's Commission on Higher Education 1947b:23). The cost of community college tuition varies widely by state, from as high as $8,600 for a full-time student in Vermont to $1,430 in California, which has the lowest public two-year tuition in the nation (Ma, Pender, and Libassi 2020). The Higher Education Act of 1965 further addressed cost-based barriers to college, creating a program of postsecondary student aid through grants and federally insured loans. Nationally, on average, full-time students at public two-year colleges receive enough grant aid to cover their tuition and fees, but not nearly enough to cover the cost of attendance (Ma et al. 2020). The costs of housing, transportation, and food pose a significant barrier to college completion for students (Goldrick-Rab 2016). As a result of rising food and housing costs, the net price of community college now rivals that of a public four-year institution: in 2020-21, the average net cost of attendance was $14,560 for community colleges compared to $19,490 for public four-year colleges, after taking into account grant aid (Ma et al. 2020). Even still, community colleges are the most affordable option for postsecondary education, and their affordability is another aspect of their design that makes them more flexible.

Fifth, community colleges offer flexible course taking. They allow students to easily enroll part time without penalty, unlike four-year colleges which require a student to fulfill

special conditions and provide documentation to be considered for part-time status. Community colleges offer courses at many times of day and on the evenings and weekends to facilitate student course participation. Students can also easily leave college and return, meaning the community college serves high school students enrolling for the first time, students transferring from other colleges, or those returning to college after a break. This unique organizational structure accords more agency to students, giving them much greater flexibility in planning their academic schedules than a traditional four-year college.

Finally, there is the flexibility that is imposed on community college students by the institution, which I call "institutional precarity." The contraction of state funding for community colleges means they have fewer resources than other colleges to retain faculty, offer consistent course offerings, and hold classes frequently. Although they play a key role within the national framework of higher education, community colleges operate with fewer institutional resources than public four-year colleges, whether measured by per-student spending (Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins 2015; Johnson 2014) or full-time college personnel (Calcagno et al. 2008). Students in this study report that community colleges often cancel classes when they have low enrollments, while other classes are overenrolled, meaning students cannot always enroll in the classes they need to fulfill major or graduation requirements. As I describe later in this dissertation, it can take years for students to complete college programs and may require them to attend multiple colleges or colleges outside their district to complete their coursework, a phenomenon which is especially clear for students in allied health majors. This institutional precarity mandates that students remain flexible, but this flexibility is not in their interest; it is required due to budget and other resource shortfalls in the community college system. The lack of resources leads to more inconsistent course offerings, which forces students to improvise, find other courses, take classes

on another campus, or even leave the community college for another institution where they can find the classes they need. Institutional precarity means that, even if students wanted to attend one college, full time and complete their degree requirements in a linear fashion, this is not always possible.

The flexible design of community colleges in admissions, course participation, programs, and credentials opened the possibility of college to a large portion of undergraduates. Students who have competing responsibilities and cannot attend college full time rely on these unique institutional characteristics to make progress towards their postsecondary goals. With reduced barriers to entry in terms of time, distance, cost, and academic performance, it is easy to see why so many students enter community colleges.

Has the promise of the expansion of higher education been fulfilled? A higher education system that was once reserved for primarily white middle- and upper-middle-class Americans is now more accessible than ever before to low-income students and students of color. But these encouraging indicators mask a less hopeful dimension of this expansion. The most frequent outcome for students who enter community colleges is no credential (Rosenbaum et al. 2017). For the cohort of first-time college students beginning in 2014, only 40 percent of those who began their studies at a community college received any postsecondary credential from a two- or four-year institution within six years of enrollment (Causey et al. 2020). Six years after enrollment, just as many students (40.7 percent) have stopped out while nearly 20 percent were still enrolled in college (Causey et al. 2020). Given that the majority of students in community college do not complete their degree in the expected time, critics suggest these institutions are more accurately described as sites of "the diverted dream" (Brint and Karabel 1989) than engines of upward mobility.

While community colleges are poised to facilitate economic mobility for a large share of the population, many students never achieve their goal of graduating and are unable to realize the economic benefits of a college degree. Community colleges have succeeded in their aim of expanding and promoting access for students, but they have yet to achieve their goal of graduating students. Because of the potential rewards of the U.S. higher educational system, students need not only to have access to college, but to leave with credentials. Why do so many community college students leave without a credential?

From Access to Completion

Researchers and policy makers have sought to understand why students may fail to complete an intended degree, with several key reasons emerging. Students may be delayed in their college completion because the courses in which they are enrolled do not count for college credit. Because prior academic performance is not considered for admission, over 60 percent of students at community colleges take at least one remedial course which decreases the likelihood that students will earn a degree (Bettinger, Boatman, and Long 2013; Kurlaender 2014; Valentine, Konstantopoulos, and Goldrick-Rab 2017). Students may encounter confusing policies and bureaucratic hurdles at the college, where institutional structures make it difficult for students to find accurate information or support in developing an academic plan (Person, Rosenbaum, and Deil-Amen 2006). Institutional differences in college quality also affect degree completion and transfer rates (Calcagno et al. 2008; Clotfelter et al. 2013; Kurlaender, Carrel, and Jackson 2016).

These studies have taught us a great deal about student preparation and institutional-level explanations. Yet, in crucial ways, the research has removed students from their context. It is no

longer enough to simply assume that students are attending college unencumbered and that the main challenges they face to sustaining enrollment emanate from the colleges themselves. To fully evaluate why so many students who begin community college leave without a credential, one needs to examine the context of students' lives. In other words, we need to look at not just what happens within the college, but what happens outside the college.

The Context of Enrollment: Living, Earning, and Learning

Community college students are increasingly coordinating school with complex personal demands outside of the classroom. An emerging line of empirical research documents the extent to which students juggle competing commitments while in college. In recent decades, the boundaries have blurred between college and other facets of students' lives, including their family obligations, paid employment, and marriage and children (Fitzpatrick and Turner 2007). Today, many students combine their participation in schooling with other activities such as working or family responsibilities including becoming a parent or caregiver.

Student Employment

Today's college enrollees are more likely to work, and work more, than their counterparts in the past. Today, 43 percent of all full-time undergraduate students and 81 percent of part-time undergraduates are employed at the same time they are enrolled in school (Snyder et al. 2019, see Table 503.40). As shown in Table 1.1, from 1970 to 2000, the fraction of full-time college students combining work and school rose from 33.8 percent to a peak of 52 percent, and while employment rates and hours of work among college students were near a 30-year low due to

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economic conditions during the Great Recession, they have rebounded in recent years (Scott-Clayton 2012).

Table 1.1: Percent of two- and four-year full-time college students employed by year

Year	Percent
1970	33.8
1975	35.3
1980	40
1985	44.2
1990	45.7
1995	47.2
2000	52
2005	49.1
2010	39.8
2015	39.5
2018	43

Source: Snyder et al. 2019, see Table 503.20.

Not only are more students working today, but employed students are working more hours than in the past. Over the past several decades, the number of hours worked by college students has increased dramatically (Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner 2012; Fitzpatrick and Turner 2007; Riggert et al. 2006; Scott-Clayton 2012; Stern and Nakata 1991). For traditional undergraduates, average hours among student workers increased from 18 to 22 hours per week between 1970 and 2008 (Scott-Clayton 2012).

These trends are more pronounced for students at community colleges. Community college students are more likely to be working and work more hours than their four-year college student counterparts (Bozick 2007; Stern and Nakata 1991). About one third (32 percent) of public two-year college students worked full time while enrolled compared with 18 percent of public four-year college students (Radford, Cominole, and Skomsvold 2015). The most recent data on part-time students at public two-year colleges, displayed in Table 1.2, show that about a

third (33 percent) of students work 20-34 hours a week and just as many work full time. In total, about 80 percent of community college students work (Community College Research Center 2020). Today, the vast majority of community college students also work for pay while they are enrolled in school and many work significant hours.

Table 1.2: Hours employed for part-time students at public two-year colleges by year

Year	Less than 20 hours	20-34 hours	35 or more hours
1990	4.1	24.9	51.1
1995	6.1	32.5	40.5
2000	9.9	30	44.9
2005	10.8	25.8	44.8
2010	11.6	30.1	31
2012	8.3	30	26.9
2013	8.8	29.8	31.2
2014	15.2	28.3	32.4
2015	11.4	36.6	26.7
2016	10.7	33	33.4
2017	14	33	32.7

Source: Snyder et al. 2019, see Table 503.20.

Researchers have studied the effects of work on academic outcomes and whether they positively or negatively impact a student's academic performance. Some studies suggest that limited employment has no relationship or even beneficial effects on educational outcomes (Bozick 2007; Staff and Mortimer 2008). Students who work fewer than 10 hours per week have slightly higher GPAs than other similar students (Orszag, Orszag, and Whitmore 2001). On-campus jobs in particular could spark a student's interest in academic programs or provide important work experience that could improve future labor market prospects (Ehrenberg and Sherman 1987; Harding and Harmon 1999).

On the other hand, several studies indicate that working significant hours may contribute to students dropping out of school or extending their time to degree. Students who work more than 20 hours a week are significantly less likely to complete college than those who do not

(Bozick 2007; Ehrenberg and Sherman 1987; Titus 2010). Rising levels of employment correspond with an increase in the time that students take to complete their degrees (Bound et al. 2012). Some studies suggest that student employment has a negative effect on students' grades, though the magnitude of the effect is small (DeSimone 2008; Kalenkoski and Pabilonia 2010; Stinebricker and Stinebricker 2003). This research suggests that part-time and on-campus employment does not significantly reduce college enrollment and may even be beneficial, but that longer hours and off-campus employment are associated with negative academic outcomes.

Overall, these findings underscore how the number of hours a student is employed matters for college success. This empirical evidence suggests employment interferes with academics, yet we lack a granular, micro-level view of students' relationships with their employment. Sociologists document these educational and employment trends with national survey data. However, while these bird's-eye-views tell us much about the prevalence of working hours, they reveal little of the nature of the jobs themselves or probe the decision-making processes that underlie these conditions. Is the qualitative nature of students' jobs—the consistency of the scheduling, physicality, time of day that students work, and other characteristics—consequential for their ability to pursue their academic goals? One of the central questions guiding this dissertation concerns how students arrange employment with their educational goals. In concert with family responsibilities, which I discuss in the following section, students' employment is central to their college experience.

Family Responsibilities

While our understanding of the relationship between employment and academic outcomes is well-developed within the sociology of education, the prevalence and consequences of students'

family commitments have received far less attention. Providing a statistical portrait of the demands imposed by family among college students is difficult, but researchers have begun to consider how college students' contact with family may create additional financial, time, and carework obligations.

Today, more young adults in the United States are living in their parental homes. In 2014, for the first time in 130 years, young adults ages 18 to 34 were more likely to be living in their parents' home than they were to be living with a spouse or partner in their own household (Fry 2016; Vespa 2017). In 2014, the share of young adults living at home with their parents increased to 32.1 percent for all young adults, and 36.0 percent for young adults who have not completed a bachelor's degree (Fry 2016).

Community college students are more likely to live at home with their parents than students at four-year colleges and universities. While about a quarter of community colleges provided on-campus housing in 2015, the vast majority (98.6 percent) of community college students live off campus (American Association of Community Colleges 2016). As shown in Table 1.3, community college students are much more likely to live with their parents (39.1 percent) compared to students at public four-year colleges (22.2 percent). The most common living arrangements for four-year and community college students is to live off campus away from parents (Kelchen 2018). Given the local nature of community colleges, this is predictable.

Table 1.3: Student living arrangements by college sector (in percentages)

Residence	Public four-year college	Public two-year college
On campus	24.8	1.4
Off campus away from parents	53.0	59.5
Off campus with parents	22.2	39.1
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Author's calculations using 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study data (National Center for Education Statistics 2018).

The ways that undergraduates contribute to their families while pursuing their studies is largely unknown. Students who live off campus with their parents may experience greater pressure to fulfill family responsibilities (Flanagan, Schulenberg, and Fuligni 1993; Turley and Wodtke 2010). Research on the bidirectional flow of resources within the families of college students has received limited attention despite calls for the importance of understanding this phenomenon (Swartz 2008).

An emerging literature suggests college students may have financial and carework obligations to family. As many as one in three college students contribute financially to their families, and some studies have suggested regular cross-generational transfers of money between parents and students (Barnard et al. 2019; Goldrick-Rab 2016). Students who live at home with their parents report that money functions as a shared fund within their household and that student and family resources are interdependent (Barnard et al. 2019; Goldrick-Rab 2016:152; Goldrick-Rab, Broton, and Gates 2013). Some research suggests this transfer of funds may be more common for low-income students or for students of color. Charles et al. (2009) reported that college students, particularly Latinx and Black students, go home more often and send money to parents or other relatives compared to white and Asian American students. A small body of research suggests that students who live at home while attending college may feel greater pressure to fulfill family responsibilities in the form of paying rent or buying groceries, caretaking of younger siblings or older relatives, or household responsibilities such as cooking meals or cleaning (Barnard et al. 2019; Flanagan et al. 1993; Turley and Wodtke 2010; Rosas and Hamrick 2002). Wiggins (2020) noted that socioeconomically disadvantaged African American college students in particular reported high levels of continued domestic responsibilities and provision of financial support to their families while attending college. Financial transfers and

carework may be driven by need or may be a reflection of cultural norms of reciprocity (Roksa 2019).

Existing literature suggests it is important to understand dynamics of family responsibility, as they may be linked to academic outcomes. Family responsibilities are associated with declines in GPA (Kinsley 2014; Telzer and Fuligni 2009). One study finds that students who chose to remain at home and attend college locally were subject to greater expectation to provide assistance to family in return, and these students were significantly less likely to persist to the second year of college (Kinsley 2014). In addition to academic outcomes, family responsibilities can create considerable stress as students struggle to navigate both school and family duties (Burton 2007; Gilford and Reynolds 2011; Hooper et al. 2012). Family demands, whether providing time or financial support to family, can be a potential barrier to academic success.

As shown in Table 1.3, not all students are living with their parents, and many students have households of their own. More than one in five college students—nearly 5 million undergraduates—are parents of dependent children (Reichlin Cruse et al. 2019). These proportions are higher among low-income, first-generation students (36 percent of whom have dependents) and racially minoritized students (for example, 39 percent of Black undergraduates have dependents) (Huerta et al. 2021). Parenting students are concentrated in community colleges. Nationally, 42 percent of parenting students are enrolled in community colleges, and, in California, 72 percent of parenting students who applied for financial aid intended to enroll in the California Community Colleges (Reed et al. 2021; Reichlin Cruse et al. 2019). A national survey of 23,000 parenting students revealed that they face intensive childcare demands, spending an average of 40 hours a week caring for children in addition to college-related activities (Goldrick-

Rab, Welton, and Coca 2020). Despite these additional commitments, parenting students describe a "firm resolve" to complete their college degrees, but compared to students without dependent children, they are less likely to do so (Peterson 2016:376). The Institute for Women's Policy Research estimates that only 37 percent of all parenting students complete a degree or certificate within six years (Gault, Holtzman, and Reichlin Cruse 2020).

Taken together, these data show that many community college students today are orchestrating outside obligations while in college and these commitments shape students' chances of finishing school. What we do not fully understand is how students manage employment and care work commitments simultaneously with their studies. While studying the prevalence of individual demands provides a snapshot, we lack a clear picture of how obligations intersect in real time, and how students are making individual choices that explain their outcomes. One of the aims of this dissertation is to uncover the ways that students manage all of these competing demands on their time as they co-occur and pile on. Rather than examining one facet of students' lives as many previous studies have done, I seek to provide a holistic picture of how family and employment and the institution of the community college interact in shaping each student's experiences and outcomes.

This Study

Millions of Americans enroll in community colleges each year, and for many, their studies will only be one facet of their lives. The obligations described in the previous section mean that students today have a tenuous grasp on college. They are working while in school, often juggling multiple jobs that do not readily align with class schedules. They are raising children, caring for elderly parents, or chipping in to help their families make ends meet. What are the family, work,

and financial contexts in which students endeavor to complete their studies? What do students see as the options available to them to juggle these commitments, and how do they adjudicate between different options (such as decreasing work hours to focus on school, dropping down from full-time to part-time status to work more hours, or moving back in with family to save money)?

This dissertation draws on longitudinal, in-depth interviews to investigate how students' obligations shape their experiences and trajectories in college. In analyzing the students' personal and academic experiences, it shows how a combination of work, family, and financial demands take up students' cognitive capacity, leaving little energy for them to complete their academic commitments. Students are often one event away from their educational plans going awry, taking a break for a time, or having their college plans fall apart altogether. Uncertainty in students' work and family lives amplifies institutional precarity at the college. Because students today attend college while embedded in their families, workplaces, and communities, their educational trajectories are often punctuated by uncertain events in their lives, those of their family members, or at the college itself. This dissertation pays close attention to the dynamic of instability in students' lives outside college as well as the ways the college itself might amplify that uncertainty. By taking a close look at how students arrange and handle their obligations in real time and uncovering how students believe this shapes their academic experiences and trajectories, my research illuminates the complexities of the contemporary community college experience. Ultimately, this dissertation aims to uncover the ways in which college completion is untenable for students without robust support.

Navigating Uncertainty

This study is informed by a body of research on insecurity and precarity. The term precarity

originates with the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1998), which he describes in his essay

"Job Insecurity is Everywhere Now," as linked to employment uncertainty and difficulty in

planning for the future. Bourdieu writes:

> It has emerged clearly that job insecurity is now everywhere: in the private sector,
> but also in the public sector, which has greatly increased the number of
> temporary, part-time, or casual positions….casualization profoundly affects the
> person who suffers it: by making the whole future uncertain, it prevents all
> rational anticipation and, in particular, the basic belief and hope in the future...
> Added to these effects of precariousness on those directly touched by it there are
> the effects on all the others, who are apparently spared. The awareness of it never
> goes away: it is present at every moment in everyone's mind (Bourdieu 1998:82).

Here, Bourdieu describes how work has become more uncertain or *precarious* for workers across

sectors. Indeed, since the 1970s changes in the U.S. employment system have led to a rise in

unpredictable and insecure work arrangements. Arne Kalleberg uses the term precarity to

describe employment that is, "uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the

worker" (Kalleberg 2009:2). Precarity results in distress for the worker in both work and non-

work experiences as people more regularly lose or fear losing their jobs, lack alternative

employment opportunities, and face diminished opportunities to obtain and maintain skills

(Kalleberg 2009; Kalleberg 2011). The struggles faced by workers in the new economy,

characterized by rising economic insecurity and risk have made work more uncertain or

precarious for more people.

Insecurity and precarity have long been documented in the lives of low-income

Americans (Halpern-Meekin et al. 2015; Hays 2004; Newman 1999). Sociologists describe the

strategies that families use as they grapple with instability and material deprivation. Families that

have more expenses than resources engage in complex planning and decision making—

balancing their food budgets, utility shutoffs, credit card payments, and kin support—to smooth things out (Desmond 2016; Edin and Lein 1997; Edin and Shaefer 2015). Turbulence and unpredictability have always been features of life for low-income Americans.

In recent years, research has shown that these dynamics are not isolated to low-income households. Heightened levels of economic and employment volatility in contemporary U.S. society mean that families across the income spectrum are experiencing a new sense of uncertainty. There has been a new scholarly emphasis on uncertainty and instability as it occurs cross-class (Cherlin 2014; Cooper 2014; Cooper and Pugh 2020; Hacker 2006; Halpin and Smith 2017; Kalleberg 2018; Pugh 2015). This sense of risk extends from economic contexts to people's home and personal lives, relationships, and how they plan for the future (Cherlin 2014; Cooper 2014; Hacker 2006; Pugh 2015, 2016; Wallulis 1998). Individuals must find ways to cope with increasing economic volatility and turbulence in family life. Cooper and Pugh (2020) present the concept of *doing dynamism* to highlight "the ongoing activity involved as people wrestle with the challenges of insecurity" (Cooper and Pugh 2020:273).

My research intervenes by applying sociological theories of precarity and instability to the educational context. I argue that this precarity is also an undercurrent in students' academic lives, shaping the way they engage with their education, make choices, and sustain enrollment (Hart 2019). In this dissertation, I show how community college students "do dynamism" as they move through college, finding ways to cope with rising uncertainty.

There are several social and economic reasons why the context of college has changed for students in ways that make college more precarious. Life course scholars have documented how young adults today face increasing uncertainty because of changing economic opportunities, the rise of precarious work, declining public investment in education, and the absence of well-

defined social pathways. Students' uncertain college careers happen against a backdrop of economic uncertainty, which is relevant for students across social classes within the United States. The nature of jobs, education requirements for jobs, and when and how people obtain job training has changed in three key ways.

First, college students today have witnessed rapid changes in the labor market that have created new jobs and job requirements (Rosenbaum et al. 2017). The educational requirements of jobs have increased over time such that today 70 percent of workers are in jobs that require some education beyond high school, and this is predicted to hold through 2027 (Blumenstyk 2020). A college degree has replaced a high school diploma as the ticket for entry into the American middle class today. Students are increasingly turning to the community college to seek training for these new education requirements. The nature of work has also changed. American workers have seen the emergence of contingent work including part-time, temporary employment, downsizing, offshoring, and a host of other responses to globalization which have placed competitive pressures on the labor market (Smith 2001; Smith and Neuwirth 2010). The rise of contingent work has added to the uncertainty that many community college students face.

Second, students face increasing costs for financing their college education. While community colleges have relatively low tuition and fees, other living expenses, such as food and housing, are problematic for these students, who may borrow money and struggle to work full time to meet these obligations for themselves and their families, while attending college simultaneously (Ma and Baum 2016). Today, most of the increases in the cost of attending college come not from tuition and fees but from other costs: high living costs driven by the crisis of unaffordable housing in California, transportation, books and supplies, and personal expenses (Goldrick-Rab 2016). The financial aid system has failed to keep up with growing student and

family need (Goldrick-Rab 2016). Although financial aid once made it possible for students to devote time exclusively to studying—with school essentially replacing work—students today very commonly study, parent, and work (Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen 2010).

Many students endure food and housing insecurity as a result of the financial challenges that they face. Food and housing insecurity are now common problems among community college students (Broton and Goldrick-Rab 2018; Goldrick-Rab 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al. 2019). Food insecurity for college students can mean purchasing minimally nutritious food that costs less, running out of food between paychecks, or skipping meals, while housing insecurity is characterized by living in substandard conditions, sleeping at friends' homes or in one's car, or, in the most severe cases, homelessness. Nationally, 11 to 38 percent of community college students report that they have very low food security, which is often associated with feelings of hunger (Blagg et al. 2017; Broton and Goldrick-Rab 2018; Nazmi et al. 2019; United States Government Accountability Office 2018; Wood and Harris 2018). Researchers estimate that half of community college students are housing insecure and that 12 to 14 percent of students are homeless (Broton 2020; Goldrick-Rab 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al. 2019). The simultaneous decrease in public funding for higher education, steep increase in tuition rates, and a growing population of low-income college students means that community college students are particularly vulnerable to material hardship.

Finally, the place of college in the life course has changed because the economic conditions that underwrote the earlier, more traditional road to adulthood no longer hold (Newman 2012). In recent decades, standardized life course patterns have given way to more varied, nonlinear life trajectories (Furstenberg 2014; Ruggles 2015; Settersten Jr. 2015a; Silva 2013). Recent studies document that the once well-ordered transition to adulthood—finishing

school, leaving home, establishing financial independence, getting married, having children—substantially differs for today's young people compared to the lives of their parents (Berlin, Furstenburg, and Waters 2010; Brinton 2010; Waters et al. 2011). Silva (2013) argues that traditional markers of adulthood have become increasingly delayed, disordered, or unattainable for working-class adults in the twenty-first century. In fact, there is now great variability in the timing and organizing of work, family, and education transitions, leading many to begin college later, leave when family or other responsibilities take priority, or return to college to deepen training, freshen skills, or pursue second or third careers (Settersten Jr. 2015a). Rather than college being a distinct phase, enrollment in higher education programs is increasingly becoming a recurring phase of the life course (Pallas 2004).

College students in the United States have seen an increase in the skills demands of jobs, the rise of insecure work, growing costs of college, and the combination of schooling with roles that were once reserved for later in the life course, all of which make college more precarious for students today. To that end, the intention of this dissertation is to explain how uncertainty and precarity manifest in the lives of community college students and to document their strategies for managing that instability.

Summit View College

The site of this study is a two-year, public institution called "Summit View College," which was selected because it is a typical California community college in terms of the size, urban location, completion rate, and demographics of the student body (California Community College Chancellor's Office 2019).

In October 2017, I recruited students from five courses in a range of disciplines held at different times of day and evening, including sociology, chemistry, and early childhood education classes. With permission of the instructors, I made an announcement at the beginning of class, offering to pay students with a $10 gift card to tell me about "what it's like for students to attend community college today." I distributed a short survey to collect demographic information from students who were interested in participating in an interview. The instructors of the courses also emailed students a recruitment message so that all enrolled students, not just those who attended class, were included in the sample. To be eligible for this study, students needed to be younger than 55, have completed high school in the United States, and plan to be enrolled in a two- or four-year college the following year.

I then purposively selected a sample balanced by demographic characteristics, including age, race, gender, social class, working and non-working students, and students with and without children. The intensive nature of the project meant that forming a representative sample was not possible. Instead I aimed for building a heterogeneous sample to glean the richest, most complete stories from a select group of students. While I did not seek a statistically random sample, these sampling measures ensured that I obtained maximum diversity among my interviewees. Table 1.4 compares my interview sample with Summit View College and the statewide demographic characteristics for the California Community Colleges.

Table 1.4: Demographic characteristics of interview population, college population, and college system by percentages and number of students (in parentheses)

	Participants	Summit View College	California Community Colleges
Total students	30	19,500	2,376,406
Age			
18 to 20 years	17 (5)	27	27
20 to 24 years	50 (15)	36	31

25 to 39 years	27 (8)	27	27
40 or more years	7 (2)	11	15
Sex			
Male	37 (11)	43	45
Female	63 (19)	54	54
Race/ethnicity			
White	33 (10)	23	26
African American	17 (5)	12	6
Asian American	20 (6)	30	15
Latinx	20 (6)	26	45
Native American	3 (1)	1	1
Two or more races	7 (2)	7	4

Source: California Community College Chancellor's Office (2019).

I interviewed students four times over a period of two years in October 2017, March 2018, October 2018, and March 2019. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted either on the Summit View campus or at a Starbucks I in the surrounding area. I compensated students with a $10 Amazon or Walmart gift card. I constructed my interview guide to investigate undergraduates' lives inside and outside of college. In the first interview, I followed a life history approach (Cole and Knowles 2001; Goodson and Sikes 2001) to investigate respondents' experiences in their final years of high school, and where relevant, experiences at other colleges and in different organizations such as the military. Subsequent interviews probed for students' current curricular and enrollment decisions, family and work obligations, experiences of material hardship, and their skills and strategies for succeeding in college. This semi-structured interview schedule was developed based on previous longitudinal studies in higher education (Ovink 2016), my own understanding of barriers to college completion, samples of interview guides from other projects (e.g., Silva 2013), and survey questions from research on basic needs in higher education (e.g., Crutchfield and Maguire 2017). As the sole researcher and interviewer, I was able to elaborate or clarify my theoretical hunches

by modifying the protocol in subsequent interviews. Unlike many site-based studies of college persistence, follow up was not contingent on continued enrollment or enrollment in a particular institution. I interviewed students regardless of whether or not they dropped out of college, transferred, or switched to another two-year institution. This research received approval from the Institutional Review Board at UC Davis and the Institutional Research Office at Summit View College.

This unique data set has a number of important advantages. Longitudinal studies using qualitative methods are rare (Burawoy 2003). The study's value is apparent in that the patterns of obligation that I find are highly consistent with findings from studies using nationally representative data; but the findings offer much more depth and insight into social processes than nationally representative data sets can provide (Lareau and Weininger 2003).

All interviews were fully transcribed and coded using Dedoose for qualitative data analysis. First, I read each transcript front-to-back. I summarized each respondent's postsecondary education history in a respondent-level memo. This allowed me to gain a better understanding of their educational pathways, triangulating data across multiple interviews. I also wrote analytic memos on emerging cross-case themes, including the findings reported in this manuscript such as the family web, work flexing, and college pathways. In coding the data, I began by applying "topic codes" to the transcripts corresponding to the sections of my interview guide, such as "family" or "work" (Deterding 2015; Deterding and Waters 2021). This facilitates the retrieval of excerpts in the transcript that correspond to interview questions about these topics. I extracted the portions of interviews related to each chapter theme and then did a secondary round of coding based on the emergent constructs from the thematic memos. The coded excerpts represent textual evidence of the findings.

Summit View Students

The students I followed from Summit View College represent a range of social class and racial/ethnic backgrounds. The median age of students is 22 years old, approximately 60 percent are women, and two-thirds are racially minoritized students. The demographic characteristics of students are summarized in Table 1.5.

Table 1.5: Student characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Social class	Semesters enrolled in college
Demond	19	Male	Black	Lower-middle class	3
Nathaniel	18	Male	Asian American	Working	0
Harlan	21	Male	White	Poor	2
Ashika	21	Female	Asian American	Lower-middle class	4
Alexa	22	Female	Black	Lower-middle class	8
Paula	32	Female	Latinx	Middle class	5
Sullivan	36	Male	Latinx	Working	2
Joyce	23	Female	Latinx	Poor	7
Tracy	41	Female	White	Middle class	14
Christiana	22	Female	Latinx	Lower-middle class	9
Stephen	21	Male	White	Lower-middle class	10
Eric	22	Male	White	Middle class	9
Amy	36	Female	Native American	Working	10
Jessi	32	Female	Black	Working	16
Danika	19	Female	White	Middle class	3
Dave	40	Male	White	Working	8
Eve	19	Female	Asian American	Middle class	2
Tara	23	Female	White	Lower-middle class	6
Mahlia	20	Female	Black	Working	3
Arianna	21	Female	Latinx	Working	6
Eduardo	20	Male	White/Latinx	Poor	7
Amanda	29	Female	White	Lower-middle class	6
Amandeep	27	Female	Asian American	Lower-middle class	3
Daniella	22	Female	Black/Latinx	Poor	9
James	20	Male	White	Middle class	5
Oliver	20	Male	Asian American	Lower-middle class	4

Holly	34	Female	White	Lower-middle class	12
Tommy	18	Male	Asian American	Working	2
Harmony	18	Female	Black/Latinx	Poor	1
Lashonda	39	Female	Black	Poor	8

Note: Semesters enrolled in college as of Fall 2017.

Community colleges were designed to serve students with a range of motivations and postsecondary goals, and reflecting this mission, students in this study ranged widely in their college journeys. Students paths to the community college began to diverge from their high school graduation, with most graduating with a traditional high school diploma, and others earning a general equivalency diploma (GED) (Holly and Jessi), graduating late due to pregnancy (Joyce), or being held back in past grades (Demond). More than a third of students (37 percent) applied to four-year colleges in their senior year of high school, and all but one was accepted. While a few of those enrolled, dropped out, and later attended community college (a pattern called reverse transfer), many more chose to attend community college instead, primarily for financial reasons. While most entered some postsecondary institution immediately after high school, seven students (23 percent) took time away from school before eventually enrolling in college. Thus, for many students, attending community college was not part of their initial plan after high school: some had wanted to attend a four-year college and others planned to enter the workforce full time.

Table 1.6: College participation, by number of students and percentages (in parentheses)

College enrollment after high school	
Immediate	23 (77)
Delayed	7 (23)
Continuity of college enrollment	
Continuous	12 (40)
Discontinuous	18 (60)
Number of colleges attended	

One (Summit View College only)	18 (60)
Two	7 (23)
Three or more	5 (17)
Type of other colleges attended	
Four-year	5 (17)
Two-year, public	5 (17)
Two-year, private, for-profit	5 (17)

Note: Students count in more than one group for type of college attended

When I first met students in the Fall of 2017, some were only beginning their college careers, while many had been enrolled in college for several semesters. While there is a cultural conception that community college students attend school for two years and earn an associate degree or transfer, few students take this path. The path from initial college entry through completion is nonlinear for most community college students. About half of contemporary two-year college students enroll at more than one college, and while some transfer to a four-year college, many swirl between community and technical colleges and private, for-profit colleges (Adelman 2006; McCormick 2003; Skomsvold, Radford, and Berkner 2011). Students' college attendance is also often disrupted. National studies have revealed that over half of students who start at a community college take some time off from college and subsequently return (DesJardins, Ahlburg, and McCall 2006; Skomsvold et al. 2011). Students who take these nonlinear and disrupted pathways are less likely to complete their degrees than students who enroll continuously at one institution (Goldrick-Rab 2006; McCormick 2003; Milesi 2010; Peter, Cataldi, and Carroll 2005). With pivots and interruptions, college students today have prolonged college careers, stretching beyond the normative time to degree.

The enrollment patterns of students in this sample reflect these national trends and are summarized in Table 1.6. Some students remained continuously enrolled, attempting classes

each semester, while others interrupted their schooling. Most students (60 percent) only attended Summit View College, but one in four students attended more than one college, either another community college, a private, for-profit, two-year college, a four-year college, or a combination of multiple institutional types. The vast majority of students in this study, even those who attended Summit View College consistently, had prolonged college careers, extending beyond the normative time to degree. I followed students through two years of this journey.

Organization of This Dissertation

The organization of this dissertation is as follows. Chapter Two analyzes students' interconnections with their families. I document the complexity of interdependencies in students' families, where the exchange of financial and practical assistance (such as running errands, providing childcare, or transportation) flows both ways. Here, I introduce the concept of the family web. Students are embedded in a family web characterized by different degrees of support and constraint in meeting their academic requirements. Chapter Three turns to the question of how students manage work and academic requirements. I argue that poor job quality makes it challenging for students to consistently meet their academic demands. Students' academic requirements regularly come into conflict with their employers, forcing students to improvise and massage their work and school schedules, a process I call *work flexing*. Chapter Four examines how informational barriers and institutional precarity combine with the forces described in previous chapters to shape students' college pathways and the decisions they make along the way to earning their degree (or leaving college). I show that structural arrangements at the college also play a part in explaining students' delayed and inconsistent progress. The

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concluding chapter summarizes the findings from this research, discusses its policy implications,

and suggests how it advances our understanding of inequality and higher education.

Chapter 2: The Family Web: How Families Serve as Both Buffer and Barrier for College Students

Families shape students' ability to succeed in college. Within popular discourse, and indeed, in much of the literature on higher education and families, families are depicted as sources of support to college students, providing financial resources, information and academic guidance, and modelling forms of participation in higher education. For example, parents strategically draw on their social capital to give tailored advice about major and coursework decisions and career pathways (Hamilton 2016; Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018; Lareau and Cox 2011; McDonough 1997; Stevens 2007). They also leverage their financial resources to pay for their children's tuition, books, rent (to live in dormitories or apartments away from home), food (in dining halls or cooked where students live independently), and subsidize them while they take unpaid internships (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Hamilton 2016; Hamilton et al. 2018; Jack 2019a).

Thus, the dominant model for understanding college student and family relationships described in this literature suggests that resources are unidirectional, flowing from parents to students. But much of what we know about this exchange of support for students in higher education is based on the experiences of middle-class individuals attending four-year residential colleges, and there is reason to suspect that these dynamics look different for two-year college students. It is helpful to consider two key characteristics of the typical community college student that may shape family resource exchange dynamics.

The first is that community college students are more likely to come from low-income families than students who attend four-year colleges. As described in the introduction, low-income students are concentrated in community colleges. Of all dependent community college

students, 31.9 percent came from families earning $27,900 or less compared to only 21.6 percent of students at public four-year colleges and 17.6 percent of students at private four-year colleges.[1] The implications of this dynamic are two-fold, both financial and informational. On one hand, lower-income families invest fewer financial resources in their young adult children than their more advantaged counterparts (Sarkisian and Gerstel 2004; Schoeni and Ross 2005). In fact, a few studies have demonstrated that low-income college students may be in the position of providing support *to* their parents and other family members (Barnard et al. 2019; Goldrick-Rab 2016; Kinsley 2014; Roksa 2019). On the other hand, because many low-income parents have not attended college themselves, they often lack the information and procedural knowledge needed to navigate higher education (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; Perna and Titus 2005; Plank and Jordan 2001). Lower-income parents also leave institutional interactions and academic decision making up to the students and expect the university to offer comprehensive academic and career counseling, since parents are not knowledgeable about professional career fields (Bryan and Simmons 2009; Ceja 2006; Hamilton 2016:98; Hamilton et al. 2018; Lareau and Cox 2011; Mullen 2010:206). While low-income parents are vital sources of emotional support (Sánchez, Reyes, and Singh 2006; Rosas and Hamrick 2002), they are not in a position to provide the same level of financial and informational support as has been observed among many families of students at four-year colleges.

The second key characteristic is that the typical community college student is more likely to live with their families than students from four-year colleges, as described in the introduction. Nearly one in four (39.1 percent) two-year college students live with their parents.[2] Even community college students who do not reside with their parents likely live near their families

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[1] Author's calculations using 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study data (NPSAS:16).
[2] Ibid.

while they attend college. These data reflect the ways in which the community college was designed to serve the local community. Yet research on family support dynamics for students who attend college locally is extremely limited. Some research suggests that students who live at home may do so because they have responsibilities to their families. In his dissertation, Peter Kinsley (2014) finds that students who remain at home and attend college locally have financial and carework obligations to family members. Though they did not bear the full costs associated with living independently, such as housing and food, these students also appeared subject to enhanced expectations around providing assistance to family members (Kinsley 2014). Other studies find that respondents in low-income families chose to attend college out of state because they believed family stress and responsibilities would compete with academic commitments (Gilford and Reynolds 2011; Rosas and Hamrick 2002). If students from these families remained local for college, research indicates that they might have felt pressure to continue assisting their families with life maintenance tasks like childcare, transportation, or food preparation.

Both of these factors suggest that community college students may be more embedded in their family relationships while attending college than past models would account for. Given the family contexts described, my research asks how resources flow in the families of community college students. What kinds of resources are exchanged? What kinds of support do community college students receive and to what extent do they have obligations to their families while in college? And how do they feel that their relationship with their families shapes their college experience? Based on the small body of research about low-income students outlined here, I expected that students would remain embedded within the social context of the family while attending college. What I discovered was that many students were not only embedded socially but played vital roles in their households as a source of financial support and practical assistance.

My findings suggest a more dynamic, bidirectional relationship between community college students and their families than has been identified previously. Specifically, I argue that students are embedded in a *family web*, a concept I develop to help us understand how resources are shared, distributed, and transferred between students and their families. As I go on to describe, the family web simultaneously enables students and obstructs them from their academic progress and degree goals. Family webs can buffer and protect students against the institutional unpredictability of the community college (Chapter 1) and the realities of students' limited financial resources (Chapter 3), yet they can also pose barriers, putting parameters on students' efforts to advance their education.

In this chapter, I explore how family support allowed my interviewees to productively push forward along their educational path, but at the same time, how responsibility to family absorbed students' temporal and cognitive resources, sometimes forcing them to slow down and occasionally disrupting their school careers. Consistent with the literature on class differences in parents' ability to pass along "college knowledge" (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2003), only a few of my interviewees received academic guidance from their parents. Students' position in their family web shaped the way they engaged academically at the community college, including the way they chose courses, their decision to attend full or part time, and how they defined their degree objectives.

I create a typology of three types of family webs entailing differing degrees of support and reciprocity between students and their families: comprehensive support, conditional support, and interdependence. *Comprehensively supported* students were fully supported by their parents and had minimal familial and social obligations to their families. *Conditionally supported* students received significant financial support in exchange for financial or carework obligations

to their families. *Interdependent* students received financial support from their families but, in turn, provided considerable financial and carework support.

The concept of interdependent *values* is not new in research on first-generation college students and/or students of color and their families. Students of color tend to have stronger attitudes around the importance of family obligation relative to their white counterparts (Desmond and Turley 2009; Fuligni and Pedersen 2002; Ovink 2014; Telzer and Fuligni 2009) and can experience a cultural mismatch between their interdependent values and university-specific norms of independence (Covarrubias 2021; Ovink 2016). But across this body of work, few studies examine interdependent *behaviors*. In one study, low-income, first-generation Asian American and Latinx university students describe providing parents with emotional support, language brokering, giving work earnings to parents, and, when they visited home, providing transportation and childcare (Covarrubias et al. 2019; Ovink 2014). Black female university students discuss running errands, reprimanding and caring for siblings, cleaning, and handling other family affairs (Gilford and Reynolds 2011). But research to date has focused on students at four-year residential colleges and has not examined how students maintain these roles while attending college and living at home.

I find that for some college students who live at home, their practical and financial interdependence with their families carries through during the college years. As I go on to discuss, a major finding is that for interdependent students, the family web enabled parents, siblings, and extended family members to persist as a result of students' efforts to obtain their higher education. Specifically, families often depended on the resources their college-going children brought into the household economy whether from paid work, student internships, or financial aid. As such, students' resources were intertwined with those of other relatives, an

insight that is crucial for understanding how and why moving through the community college pipeline can be challenging. In an ongoing, interactive process, families shaped interdependent students' educational trajectories while students, in turn, shaped their families' survival and prosperity.

Students' Social Class Backgrounds and Webs: Descriptive Data

As described in the introduction, community colleges have historically catered to families from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. As would be expected from the literature on community college students, my interviewees came from a range of social class backgrounds, with none coming from affluent or upper-middle-class families. I determined the class position of families in this study on the basis of parental education, occupation, and household earnings, as displayed in Table 2.1. Compared to participants in studies of four-year colleges, students in this study were considerably less well-resourced. I use the terms less affluent or lower income to refer to families in this study since no students were from affluent or privileged families where parents had advanced degrees or were working professionals (e.g., doctors, lawyers, professors, accountants). Out of the 30 students in this study, 20 were first-generation college students, where neither parent held a four-year college degree.

Table 2.1: Typical characteristics of class groups

Class	Parents' highest level of education	Parents' occupations	Annual family income	n
Middle	Associate or bachelor's degree	State administration, nurse	$80,000 to $100,000	6 (20%)
Lower-Middle	$\leq$Some college	School administration, insurance sales	$45,000 to $80,000	10 (33%)
Working	$\leq$Some college	Nail technician, correctional officer	$30,000 to $45,000	8 (27%)
Poor	GED or <High school diploma	Cafeteria worker, gas station attendant	<$30,000	6 (20%)

Middle-class students (n=6) came from families that earned $80,000 to $100,000 a year. Their parents owned their homes and held stable, well-compensated jobs such as working as a state administrator or hospital nurse. All parents in middle-class families had earned a high school diploma and many held a bachelor's or associate degree. Students in lower-middle-class families (n=10) had less stability but consistently made ends meet. Their parents worked in insurance, school administration, or held lower-level healthcare positions, such as certified nurse assistant. Many lower-middle-class families owned their homes, though some rented their homes and had higher incomes. While their parents had some exposure to higher education, usually at a two-year college or technical school, most had never earned a degree.

Working-class (n=8) and poor families (n=6) were characterized by lower levels of economic security and had little exposure to higher education. None of the working-class families owned their homes. Students' mothers generally worked low-paying service jobs (e.g., nail technicians) and their fathers performed blue collar or manual labor (e.g., prison guards, mechanics). Poor students came from families who earned $30,000 a year or less and many received public assistance. Their parents typically held a GED or had never graduated from high school and worked in low-level service jobs (e.g., school cafeteria, gas station).

Along with their social class backgrounds, students varied in their household and living arrangements and in how their home context shifted over the study period. Nearly half of the students in this study (47 percent) were unmarried and lived with their parents.[3] Six students (20 percent) lived in households that included both their immediate family (their guardians, in the case of unmarried students, or their spouse, in the case of married students) and extended family members, such as uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandparents. For example, Tracy, a 41-year-old

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[3] Nationally, 65.4 percent of dependent, unmarried two-year college students live with their parents (based on author's calculations of 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study data).

student, lived with her 6-year-old son, adult brother, and parents. Dani, 22 years old, lived with her mom, sisters, and grandmother. Six students (20 percent) lived with their spouse or partner and four (13 percent) were living on their own or with roommates at the time of the last interview. About half (48 percent) of students lived in a home that they rented and roughly the same number (52 percent) lived in a home that was owned by their family, or, in two cases, by the students themselves.

Six students (20 percent) had children of their own and many more had caretaking responsibilities for young siblings, nieces, and nephews. Research has shown that parenting students face distinct challenges while in college, including economic insecurity and significant time and caregiving demands, that can affect their educational outcomes (Gault et al. 2020). Parenting students have greater financial responsibilities compared to students without dependent children. Across postsecondary institutions, a majority of parenting students are employed full time, while others are balancing part-time employment with their caregiving and academic responsibilities (Sallee and Cox 2019). A recent survey of over 150,000 college students in California found that students with dependents (including dependent children and also dependent adults such as ill or elderly family members) spent substantially more per month ($3,103) than those without dependents ($1,830) (California Student Aid Commission 2019). Facing greater expenses, parenting students face more pressure to work and are at higher risk than other students for basic needs insecurity. While rates of basic needs insecurity are substantial among nearly all college students, they are especially high among parenting students; in a recent national survey of over 23,000 parenting students, 53 percent were food insecure in the prior 30 days and 68 percent were housing insecure in the previous year (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2020).

It was very common for students to experience housing disruptions. Over the two years of this study, roughly a third of students (30 percent) moved one or more times, sometimes involuntarily, and many more (47 percent) experienced changes in the members of their household: Sully and his girlfriend took in a family friend; Amy's uncle came to live with her and her husband while he was recovering from a hospitalization; Demond's aunt and cousin stayed with them for a few months. For the majority of the sample, students' home lives were characterized by unpredictability and uncertainty.

Surveys of community college students show that these dynamics are not uncommon. Many community college students in California lack access to affordable housing, and as a result, students face challenges like moving in with people due to financial problems, living with others beyond the expected capacity of their housing, or being unable to pay the full amount of rent and utilities. In a survey of over 40,000 community college students in California, 60 percent reported experiencing housing insecurity in the last year and 19 percent experienced homelessness (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2019). These trends are not uncommon among community college students nationally (Broton 2020), but they are especially acute in California where there is a shortage of affordable housing and many households are cost burdened, spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs and utilities.

Table 2.2: Students' household arrangements, by number of students and percentages (in parentheses)

Living arrangement	
With parents (or parents and siblings)	14 (47)
With immediate and/or extended family	6 (20)
With spouse or partner	6 (20)
On own or with roommates	4 (13)
Students with children	6 (20)

Housing ownership	
Rent	14 (48)
Owned by student or family	15 (52)
Moved during study period	9 (30)
Change in household composition during study period	14 (47)

Note: Living arrangement and housing ownership at time of last interview. One missing case for housing ownership.

The *Family Web*: Three Configurations of Support and Reciprocity

All community college students in my study remained deeply embedded in their families, including extended families, while they attended college.[4] I characterize students' relationships with family members in college as a family web that acts both as a resource and obligation. On the one hand, families can provide support and be a buffer against unforeseen circumstances that could knock students off course as they move through college. On the other hand, families can act as a drain or drag on schooling, holding students back from fully engaging with school. The family web can cushion and protect people, but it can also block peoples' ability to stay in college when financial and carework obligations take time and attention away from school.

I found that to different extents, students and their families gave, received, and exchanged three different types of kin support: financial, carework—the work of caring for others (Misra 2011)—and practical assistance, a term used to describe in-kind support (Fingerman et al. 2009; Seltzer and Bianchi 2013). Financially, students varied in the extent to which they were responsible for bills from school (e.g., books, supplies, student fees, and tuition), general cost-of-

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[4] One student in the study (Harlan, 21 years old) did not fit into any category because he had infrequent contact with his family, and I determined him to be disconnected from both family support and obligation. Harlan is an outlier because he is nearly estranged from his family. Without family support, Harlan's living situation is precarious. Harlan is housing insecure. He lives with his friend's mom, his friend, and another roommate in a house she rents using a housing voucher. He is responsible for all of his bills (rent, bills, bike repairs, etc.) and has no financial safety net.

living expenses (e.g., rent, groceries, cell phone, and car payments, insurance, and gas), and less essential payments (e.g., media subscriptions, gym memberships, and money for leisure and recreation). Students had income from their employment (discussed in Chapter 3) or their financial aid award and relied on their family members' income to pay these bills. I found considerable variation in the way that students negotiated these payments and income sources with their parents and the extent to which they were financially beholden to their families while in college.

Students also provided practical assistance to their families in the form of domestic work such as cooking, cleaning, running errands like grocery shopping, yard work, repairs, and, in the case of students whose parents were immigrants, serving as a translator and broker for family members. Finally, students and their families exchanged carework, work that included taking care of students' own children, younger siblings, or caring for ailing parents or elderly relatives.

I enumerate three configurations of family webs to conceptualize the extent of support and obligation within students' families. Students in *comprehensive* family webs (n=7, 24 percent) mostly benefitted from their relationships with their families, as parents and other family members provided extensive financial support and sheltered students from family responsibilities. Students in *conditional* family webs (n=9, 31 percent) had their core financial expenses supported by their parents (such as rent and utilities) but were sometimes expected to pay for their own expenses (such as car insurance) and were also obligated to their families with significant carework duties. Finally, *interdependent* students (n=13, 45 percent) were deeply entwined with their families' financial and daily care needs and had the highest degree of resource exchange. With two thirds of students in the sample falling into the conditionally

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supported or interdependent groups, the typical model for my sample is one with significant exchange of resources between students and their families.

Comprehensive Family Webs: "I'm being put on a platter to go to school"

In my sample, seven students received complete financial support from their families and have no practical or carework obligations to them. I call this level of support Comprehensive and it is outlined in Table 2.3. Financially, students' families paid for all of their expenses and sometimes gave them spending money or cash for food or gas. In several cases, students worked part time or less to pay for their additional expenses like subscriptions, hobbies, or gas but their employment was not essential for meeting their basic needs. Students received practical support in the form of parents letting the student use a family car, buying food, and preparing the students' meals. Their family members did not require the student's financial or practical support, so their primary obligation was their work as a student. Rather than *exchanging* support with their families, comprehensively supported students mostly *received* financial and practical support. Their families did not require them to help pay bills, provide childcare, or cook meals for them. In these families, parents were not dependent on students and students did not engage in work to contribute to the family's survival. Rather than a mutually beneficial, exchange-based relationship, comprehensively supported students were in a position to receive support from their families. Students may have had expectations placed on them by their families (such as a curfew, the expectation to eat dinner together, or attend church/temple) but these expectations did not extend to directly assisting their families. For comprehensively supported students, their relationship with their families was not reciprocal, but characterized by the receipt of support.

All of the students in this category lived with their families in homes they own (except Alexa, age 22, who lived with a roommate in a condo that her parents helped her purchase). Comprehensively supported students were 19 to 22 years old, unmarried and without children and came from middle- or lower-middle-class backgrounds.

Table 2.3: Comprehensive family webs

Characteristics
Financial
Family pays for major expenses like rent, utilities, and health insurance
Student may pay for their hobbies (such as a music subscription, streaming service, or gym membership)
Student may be partially responsible for some of their school costs (like books)
Family may provide spending money for food or gas during the week
Student may work minimally or not at all
Family can help students with unexpected financial events
Carework and practical assistance
Family provides student with a car
Family buys and prepares student's food
Student drives their own car to school
Student has ample free time for hobbies, friends, and relaxing
Student's obligations to their families are fun/social or religious
Students in the text
Demond (Lower-Middle Class [LMC])   Oliver (LMC)
Stephen (LMC)   Alexa (LMC)
Eric (Middle Class [MC])   Eve (MC)
James (MC)

Financial

Comprehensively supported students had full funding from their families. However, the quality and quantity of financial support from students' families did not match reports of past studies of students at four-year residential colleges. Students at four-year residential colleges commonly receive different types of financial assistance in which families pay their rent away from home and pay for their dining plans. In this study, students who lived at home and were supported by

their parents received financial assistance, but it was a continuation of the support they received growing up (rent and food) rather than a direct cash payment. The cost of maintaining these students' lives was effectively absorbed into the household budget rather than a separate expenditure. Students in this study believed that paying for room and board was beyond the financial capability for their families.

Unlike past reports of four-year college students, even the most comprehensively supported students were typically responsible for some expenses, like a music subscription or gym membership. Some were also partially responsible for their education expenses, like books, but their core expenses—rent, utilities, groceries, and car and health insurance—were covered by their families. James, 20 years old, described "I don't have to pay any bills…. I'm part of some sort of family plan still, so I don't have to pay for [my phone bill]. I pay gas though….But that's the only thing I really pay." James primarily spent his money on "food and luxuries." While some comprehensively supported students were employed, they spent their earnings on luxuries for themselves, savings, or their hobbies like buying card or computer games, their pets, or extracurricular activities like baseball or dance. James continued: "Right now I'm saving a bunch of money. I paid for the camera that I'm getting. So I guess you would say food and luxuries."

Some comprehensively supported students received spending money from their parents. As Eve, a 19-year-old student, described, "I don't really have to pay bills besides the subscriptions that my family uses like Netflix. And then semester-wise, I pay for my parking, [and] for books." In addition to covering her housing and food costs, Eve's parents give her additional spending money. "If my parents are like, 'Do you need money?' And I would just say no, but I'll end up getting a 10 dollar or 20-dollar bill in my car. They're like 'just in case.'" It

was typical for comprehensively supported students to get small amounts of cash from their parents, though students preferred to work rather than ask their parents for spending money.

Students like Stephen, 21 years old, could attend college without worrying about paying for essential bills. At first, when I asked Stephen about his income sources, Stephen described himself as self-supported: "This is mostly on my own. Like I haven't really been like asking my parents for any money or anything. It's just been my own income." In his initial account, parental support was absent from his narrative. In his presentation of self, he obscured the level of dependence he had on his family. He presented himself as an independent adult by understating how dependent he was on his parents and others in his family. Stephen's idea of being on his own meant not asking his parents for cash. But later, when I asked him to describe how he made ends meet and the kinds of bills he paid every month, he said:

> The cell phone, I mean, my parents pay for, but that's because they have the plan...And then my car insurance is from my parents because they have my insurance with their insurance.....And then for gas, I don't really have to worry about that either because my dad works for a company where they get gas for free.

Stephen's parents completely supported him, covering his cell phone bill, auto insurance, and even giving him gas cards. But in his account, Stephen omitted explicit recognition of the single largest expenses he avoids while living at home: his rent and food. For students like Stephen, their finances were blended into the household budget. Certain kinds of support were invisible to students. Comprehensively supported students did not pay rent (because their mortgage is paid by their parents) and their parents also bought and cooked their food. No comprehensively supported students mentioned rent and food as expenses covered by their parents, so in this way, students obfuscated their dependence on their families. Stephen's obfuscation notwithstanding,

his family web was a considerable resource to him, enabling him to take a fairly low-key approach to finishing his second AA degree.

Parents' financial support of college came without condition of academic performance. James took three general ed classes in his first semester of college but ended up withdrawing from all of them because of a "lack of interest." Even though his parents were unhappy that he dropped out, they continued to financially support him.

> My dad wasn't so happy that I spent all the money on those classes and then dropped out of all of them. He was trying to keep me in college and finish it out at least…..And then my parents sponsored me going back to college. They're always willing to help me.

The full financial support of James' parents meant that they continued to support him taking a relaxed approach to college. His motivation wavered—due to pressure from his parents, his own interest in his major (film), and his belief that he may not need a college degree to pursue video editing. James dropped out of college by the third interview, and while his parents threatened to make him pay rent, he continued to have their full financial support whether he was attending college part time, full time, or not at all, completed or withdrew from his classes, and whether he was completing major, general education, or exploratory coursework.

Carework and Practical Assistance

For comprehensively supported students, the extent of their obligations to family was spending time together, attending religious services or having family meals. Stephen described: "We have events where we go to my grandparents' every Sunday. You know, we have certain Portuguese traditions that we do. And it's just the events that we hang out with family like Christmas and stuff like that."

The extent of students' family obligations might be driving their siblings to school. Oliver, age 20, shared a 2003 Honda Accord with his younger brother who also attended Summit View College, and they drove to school together.

> I share a car with Otto…And it makes it easy for me because I can take him to [Summit View College] and then he can have his friends take him home. That's just how it has been for the past semester….it was a little annoying because he told me that he would have to come to class at around 9 a.m. in the morning. And I'm still asleep by then because I usually stay up pretty late.

Since students had minimal obligations, much of their down time was spent on their hobbies such as video games, hanging out with friends or partners, or their extracurricular activities such as baseball or dance. Eve described a typical Tuesday for her: "I have [dance] practice from 7 to 9, so two hours. And then I'd have class at 10:30, which is my spin class. So, 10:30 to 11:50. And then after that, I'd go back home, do homework, and then Tuesdays go to work." Alexa was pursuing a modelling career and spent several hours a day exercising with a personal trainer.

> Right now, I am training for a fitness show so I work out twice a day. The first workout is at 5 o'clock a.m. and my last one is at 6 o'clock. And they're not regular workouts. They're really high intense workouts….[it's] a fitness bikini show. It's bodybuilding in a sense, but it's the first level of it.

Comprehensively supported students were in the position of receiving carework and practical support from their parents, rather than providing support. Demond, age 19, was raised by his grandmother and aunt. He described how his grandmother and aunt gave him a ride when his car broke down.

> I did get into an accident, I would say a few months ago, in a car. I was immediately saved with my aunt helping me and my grandmother saying, "OK, I can drop you off at this time and that time." And I was really grateful for that. So I think that is a really good benefit of living back here.

Demond's guardians did not require him to help them with any carework or practical assistance. With comprehensive support from his grandmother, the hardest thing about college for Demond was "just figuring out what you really want to do" for a career or major.

> [My grandmother] has not been that involved in me figuring out what I need to do or how I need to do it, because…I think she knows that, "You're an adult. You know what you can do. If you need help, you can always come to me. I know you will come to me if you need to."….I would tell her afterward that, "hey, I talked to so-and-so, or I got information on this."

Like all of the students I interviewed, Demond's family assistance stopped short of providing college knowledge and guidance. Consistent with prior research, middle- and working-class families took a hands-off approach to providing informational and educational support. Parents did not help students navigate college, choose classes or majors, or intervene beyond a general encouragement that their children remain in college.

Few students were aware of how the support they received from their families, and their lack of obligations to their families, helped them move smoothly through college. For most comprehensively supported students, their descriptions of their family life occluded a layer of support that was always there for them. Eric, a 22-year-old student, was "fully supported" and did not "have any bills." While Eric did not consistently pay any of his own bills, he was responsible for some of his own expenses as they arose—such as a speeding ticket he got on the way to school. While Eric's parents had the means to pay his expenses in full, he split some school and luxury expenses with them. While Eric's parents paid his tuition, he was responsible for his books. When Eric needed a new phone, he split the cost with his parents (he contributed $300, his parents $500). When I asked Eric what he thought was helping him succeed in college, he said:

> I'm being put on a platter just to go to school. I only do as well as I do because of that. I don't have much stress…My parents don't stress me out…I don't have to

stress about my financial situation.

Eric recognized that his parents' extensive support was like a platter, supporting him to focus on school and not a stressful home life or employment situation. Comprehensively supported students were aware that their parents' support helped them but had never imagined having to pay the cost of rent or food, so in this way, they were unaware of the level of support they received. These supports meant that Eric believed he had agency over how his academic goals unfold, but it did not guarantee that he moved smoothly through college. Eric has been enrolled full time for four years and has yet to complete his transfer or degree requirements due to failing classes, switching majors, and not having a clear course of study.

Conditional Family Webs: "I am a major part of my household"

For students who received conditional support (n=9), their families provided the majority of students' financial support, but also expected students to contribute either financially or through carework or practical assistance. In other words, parental support was conditional on students' carework contributions and financial responsibility for their own essential expenses (like their cell phones and cars). Their family obligations, or their work obligations, were significant enough to take time away from students' engagement in their schooling. What differentiates students who received conditional support is that parents staked their support on students' contributions. Families provided a baseline of support covering rent and food. Families subsidized students' cost of living but expected, in return, that students would cover their own bills and help out around the house.

Most of the students in this category came from lower-middle-class or working-class families where parents may not have had the means to pay for students' cell phone or

transportation expenses. Students ranged in age from 18 to 40 years old, and all but two lived

with their parents or family. None of the students had children of their own, but many had

significant responsibilities to other family members. For both the younger and older students in

this category, their families were their primary sources of support, but students were required to

pull their own weight through financial or practical responsibilities, or sometimes both.

Table 2.4: Conditional family webs

Characteristics
Financial
Family pays for major expenses like rent, utilities, and health insurance
Student pays for some of their own expenses like cell phone, gas, or car insurance
Student receives financial support from family for major expenses (like car repairs)
Student is responsible for school expenses but receive help from family
Carework and practical assistance
Family buys and prepares student's food
Family gives student rides to campus or helps fund their car
Student helps their parents with cleaning, errands, yardwork
Student has regular care work responsibilities for other family members
Student required to provide childcare for siblings

Students in the text		
Tara (Lower-Middle Class [LMC])	Danika (Middle Class)	Amy (WC)
Dave (Working Class [WC])	Nathanial (WC)	
Christiana (LMC)	Ashika (LMC)	
Jessi (WC)	Tom (WC)	

Financial

Students in conditional family webs had more financial responsibilities than comprehensively

supported students. Tara, age 23, lived with her parents in a house that they rent and worked to

pay for her phone bill, car insurance, gas, and food. Tara was primarily responsible for her school

expenses, but her parents helped make up the difference if she cannot afford it. "I pay whatever I

can out of pocket. My parents help." Still, her parents paid for large expenses like rent which was

$1,700 a month, far more than Tara made between her two part-time jobs. Consistent with earlier

examples, the cost of paying Tara's rent was absorbed into the household budget; her rent was

not a separate item. Danika, a 19-year old student, realized that she benefitted from living at

home rent-free, but at the same time, she had significant financial obligations because she was

responsible for all of her own bills.

> [My parents] don't make me pay rent yet. They make me do everything else like
> car insurance, phone bill, that kind of stuff. But I'm really thankful they don't
> make me pay rent. That really helps….And then any time my car has a problem,
> my dad has usually paid for it because it's been pretty expensive. But lately I've
> been paying for all of the car repairs and stuff because I have two jobs, so I have a
> lot of money saved up. And every time my car has a problem now, I just pay for
> that.

Unlike students with comprehensive support, who worked because they preferred to have their

own income for luxury expenses or to establish independence from parents, conditionally

supported students needed to work to pay for their bills. Danika had not planned on getting a job

until her parents told her that she needed to contribute financially to her expenses:

> I was never motivated to look for a job in high school. I was like, "I don't want to
> work."…Because my parents always gave me money. I always had money to do
> things…but around junior, senior year, my parents are like, "You need to get your
> own job and start making your own money because you do have to start
> contributing to all these payments."

Like Danika, most conditionally supported students received the majority of their financial

support from their families but were also expected to contribute to their bills and take on

financial responsibilities that are inconsistent with dominant expectations of college students

today. As I discuss in Chapter 3, the need to pay her own bills led Danika to work two jobs,

which made it difficult to find time for and have energy and attention to do homework. On the

other hand, the fact that Danika's parents covered her larger expenses (like rent, groceries, and

health insurance) allowed her to save up $12,000 for a new car, which she had purchased at the time of our last interview.

Tommy, 18 years old, lived in a two-bedroom apartment where his parents shared a room with his five-year-old brother. As a low-income student attending college full time, Tommy received financial aid for tuition (the California Promise Grant) and several thousand dollars for living expenses through the Cal and Pell Grants.[5] Tommy used a few hundred dollars of his award to buy a new laptop but gave the rest of the money to his parents, treating the aid as family income. Tommy saw his family as "financially stable," but was also aware that, with only one parent working full time, his financial aid award was an important source of income for his family for larger expenses (like insurance) or as a financial "safety net."

> I do have financial aid at the moment. Because, our household, only one parent is [working] full time. The other parent has a side gig. So basically what we do is, my financial aid is a safety net. Where I can buy the fees I need for college, but the rest all go to savings or for maybe paying for insurance or paying for the bigger bills. Because I told my parents that if you need to use a large sum of money, my financial aid will always be there for usage.

Tommy's financial aid was a vital source of income for his family, along with his parents' work income and the food and housing public assistance they received. With these sources of income and his parents' support, Tommy was able to attend school full time and make consistent progress on his nursing requirements without the need to work.

Conditionally supported students were more aware of the benefits of their families' financial support and recognized that their current life as a student would be impossible without it. After living independently for several years, Dave, 40 years old, moved back home when he

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[5] The California Promise Grant is a financial aid award from the California Community Colleges that permits enrollment fees to be waived. The Cal Grant is a California-specific financial aid allocation for postsecondary students in California. The Federal Pell Grant is awarded to undergraduate students who display exceptional financial need.

enrolled at Summit View College. Dave's parents allowed him to live with them rent free and paid for his groceries. His mom paid for his books and cell phone; she also put a down payment on a car for him. Dave was expected to pay for his car insurance, health insurance, gas, and other expenses. Dave realized that without the financial support of his parents, he would not have been able to afford to go back to college in the first place.

> I really came to the realization that I'm close to being homeless right now. I can envision that. That's not a step that's far away. That was a real sobering experience to realize that with one or two slight things, I could be living on the street….The situation I have now with my parents, it's really good. They're really supportive. I'm super grateful that we get along great. We always have. But it always is in the back of my mind that without this support, I don't know where I'd be.

Ashika, age 21, lived at home with her parents and shared a room with her older sister. Initially, Ashika's parents allowed her to live with them rent-free, paying for her cell phone bill, and providing her with health insurance. Ashika paid for books (and used the $300 book voucher from EOPS[6]), gas, and her Netflix bill. She recognized that not having to pay bills was "one of the luxuries of living at home."

> Right now, I just pay for tuition and books. I bought my own phone, but I'm still underneath their billing. My mom still pays for the bill. So that's it basically. And I have to do my laptop… I don't pay a lot of bills. I think that's one of the luxuries of living at home. If you're on your own, you have to pay a lot of bills.

Like Ashika, conditionally supported students could envision how they would need to restructure their employment and academic engagement if they were responsible for the full cost of living. By the final interview, Ashika's parents had increased the stakes on which they would allow her to continue living at home, asking her to pay $100 a month in rent and contribute $800 towards their home remodel.

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[6] Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) is a state funded program that aims to help low-income and educationally disadvantaged students succeed in college.

I pa[id] close to 800 dollars for flooring…I told her… "I've applied to university and I'm gonna transfer. I'm not gonna live here no more [sic], and there's no reason for me to pay 800 dollars." And, she got mad, she was like, "No. That's your room. You need to take care of it." So, I did. And I'm paying rent, a hundred dollars each month as well….I feel like if I'm gonna pay money, I should have my own place. I should have my own freedom. I feel like I'm paying money, but they're still controlling me in a way.

By the final interview, Ashika's family web shifted to provide fewer supports and increased obligation. In this case, Ashika's parents staked their financial support on the condition that she contribute financially to the upkeep of the house. The conditions of her parents' support conflicted with Ashika's academic priorities of leaving home for college and saving her work income for tuition.

Carework and Practical Assistance

While the shape of the carework or practical support varied depending on each student's family situation, conditionally supported students were expected to help contribute to the care of their families. Even in cases where students received full financial support from their families, their family web constrained them and limited their cognitive capacity for making academic progress when they were accountable to caring for their families. Jessi's family web mostly enabled her to focus on school, since her mother paid Jessi's rent and other bills for her one-bedroom apartment. But this support was also a constraint, because in turn, Jessi, a 32-year-old student, helped her mom and uncle. Jessi provided care to her uncle (who is schizophrenic and struggles to live independently), including grocery shopping and cooking meals for him. She was also responsible to her mother by cleaning her house and monitoring her medications.

> I try to be a good daughter and take care of her and go over and wash and fold her clothes because she works a lot. She's a R.N. and she does a lot of doubles….so she works a lot and she doesn't have a lot of time at home to do stuff like she should, probably. So I like to go over and try to clean up for her. I try to make

sure she's all right. Her potassium levels dropped. I had to buy her some vitamins. Students' family responsibilities shaped every part of their college experience, including the four-year colleges or universities where they saw themselves transferring. Tommy, whose parents immigrated to the US from Vietnam, saw himself as a "major part" of providing practical support and carework for his household.

> With my household, I am a major part of my household and I can't afford to leave for four years away from my home. At college, [CA] State and Summit View are very nearby here, so I can still be in my household because I am the technician of the house. I am the engineer the house. I fixed up most of the stuff….And I know all the American stuff my parents don't understand because they are foreigners from a different country.

Tom's example demonstrates how children of immigrants were called upon to bridge communication and information transfer barriers between the adults in their families and the dominant culture. For the three students who were born abroad, and oftentimes for the nine students who were second-generation immigrants, part of their practical assistance to their families involved serving as translators and brokers for family members in school, health, and social service settings (Valenzuela Jr. 1999).

Dave had considerable responsibilities at home while living with his mom and stepdad in a rural town south of the college on a 15-acre property where they raised livestock. At home, he did two hours of chores a day including "Mow the lawns, take care of the kitchen, feed the dogs, do a lot of the outdoor chores, pruning the trees, taking care of the animals. A lot of the outdoor stuff. Vacuuming, things like that." Dave's parents did the cooking and cleaning, and, in return, he spent 15 hours a week on the practical work of helping his parents maintain their property.

Many students supported their families in the form of providing carework for younger siblings. Nathan's parents paid for all of his bills (including his cell phone) and let him use the family car. While he was living at home with his parents in an apartment they rent, Nathan, age

18, provided childcare for his younger brothers, who are 11 and 5 years old. Nathan spent 10 to 20 hours a week picking his siblings up from school or his grandparents' house, cooking for them, and supervising them. "Of course, they're young so they don't know how to cook. So I have to cook for them. So a lot of times I'll cook pasta for us or order Chinese food." When Nathan dropped out of college and moved in with his aunt after an argument with his parents, the interdependencies within their family web became clear. Nathan, whose parents had paid for his car and cell phone when he was living at home, was limited to finding a job within walking distance of his aunt's house and had to borrow his grandfather's cell phone. By the same token, Nathan's parents struggled with childcare because Nathan was no longer around to help out while they were at work.

When his parents were at work on the weekends, Tommy, the student who gave his financial aid award to his parents, spent about 20 hours watching his little brother who is 5 years old. Tommy summarized his typical sibling care responsibilities, "I have to watch my little brother because we don't want to spend money on a daycare and relatives are a little too far away from our area to watch him. So I'm the one who watches over him, feeds him, bathes him, and…play[s] outside." When Tommy and I meet the following semester, he described how twice this semester, his parents asked him to miss class to take care of his little brother. Since his father works on-call as an airport driver, his parents asked him to skip class "whenever his client calls him." Tommy explained: "Because my father, he has work to do, and my mom is already at work. So my little brother will be home alone…So they asked me, "could you skip this one class so you can be with your little brother?" I'm like, "dang it! But okay." It seems that for Tommy, the cost of skipping class was rational within the circumstances of his life: the cost of his brother not having childcare outweighed the benefit of attending class and learning the material to

perform well on the exam. For students like Tommy and Nathan, their daily routine included shuttling their younger siblings between school and home, cooking for them, and supervising them. From the perspective of the families of conditionally supported students, having their adult student live at home may have allowed the parents to save on childcare costs; for the student, sharing the costs of living at home relieved them of having to work full time, allowing them to attend college.

Students provided regular care for disabled, aging, or ailing parents for many hours each week. Tara, whose parents were in their late 60s, was responsible for taking care of them when they had health issues. Tara recalled how, in the semester before I met her, her mom had four heart attacks during the the spring semester and her dad suffered internal bleeding. Caring for her parents—driving back and forth to the hospital and helping them recover at home—led Tara to drop out of her organic chemistry class:

> When she was really sick, she spent a lot of time in the hospital. So it was going from school to work to the hospital, trying to manage all of that. And when she got out of the hospital, she was a lot weaker than before…So it was a matter of keeping her from doing things and even doing things for her.

Not only did she drop out of her class in the spring semester, but the following fall semester she reduced her academic responsibilities as a direct result of her carework duties. The following semester, Tara "decided to take two science courses instead of a full load in case something did happen," making the preemptive decision to reduce her courseload based on anticipated family responsibilities. Reducing the number of units she took each term to account for her parents' health issues lengthened the time it took for her to earn her degree. Tara was able to adjust her education around the needs of her family because of the unique institutional context of the community college, which, as you recall from Chapter 1, allows students to reduce their course load without justification or penalty.

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Interdependent Family Webs: "It's like playing a game of chess"

Most students (13 of 30) had interdependent family webs, characterized by a bidirectional exchange of resources: financial, practical, carework, and in many cases all kinds of resources. Within the interdependent category, students fall into two main groups. The first group consists of students without children (Eduardo, Daniella, Harmony, Lashonda, Mahlia, Aman, and Arianna). In most of these cases, students lived with their parents, who depended on them to meet the family's daily survival needs like rent and utility payments. Students in this first group were 24 years old on average and came from highly disadvantaged families; all of the students classified as poor are included in this category, as are a few working-class students. The second group of interdependent students consists of students who are parents of dependent children (Paula, Sully, Joyce, Tracy, Amanda, and Holly). All of the students who were parents were interdependent with their families because they had full-time childcare responsibilities, financial obligations that required them to work full time, or both. Parenting students came from a range of social class backgrounds and were older, with an average age of 33.

In both cases, interdependent students' families could not make do without the reciprocal support from the student. Compared to conditional students, interdependent students took on more significant financial obligations as they related to their families. As described in the previous section, students in conditional family webs were expected to pay some or all of their own bills and expenses. In contrast, interdependent students were expected to pay their own bills *and* expenses of others in the household. Interdependent families functioned as a two-way system of support: students within these families were supported by their families but also supported them in key ways.

Interdependent family webs

Characteristics

Financial

Family members rely on student financially

Student regularly pays family expenses (such as monthly rent or utilities)

Student is partially responsible for larger expenses (such as home remodel)

Student lends family money

Student treats financial aid or income from employment like a family wage

Student splits bills with their parents

Family coordinates the timing of their bills

Carework and practical assistance

Student shares a car with family or relies on them for rides

Student has significant care responsibilities for family

Students in the text

Paula (Middle Class [MC])	Eduardo (Poor)	Mahlia (WC)	Arianna (WC)
Sully (Working Class [WC])	Daniella (Poor)	Aman (Lower-Middle Class [LMC])	
Joyce (Poor)	Harmony (Poor)	Amanda (LMC)	
Tracy (MC)	Lashonda (Poor)	Holly (LMC)	

Financial

Interdependent students shared financial obligations with their families. Eduardo's financial

arrangement with his mom was typical of those students living with and sharing expenses with

their parents. Eduardo, 20 years old, lived with his mom in a two-bedroom duplex that they

rented. Between his two part-time jobs, Eduardo may have been able to afford living on his own,

but he "would be living very thinly," without any money set aside for unexpected expenses like

car repairs. Instead, he chose to live with his mom and split the bills with her.

> So my mom and I, we don't split the rent but I do set aside a few hundred every
> month to help out with that. I pay our car insurance. I pay one of the utilities;
> we'll go back and forth between if it's electrical or gas. I pay the internet on our
> house, too. I pay for my Netflix and my Apple music. Gas is also another thing
> that I am on my own for. And then groceries, we'll also split between her and I,
> like whoever does grocery shopping for the week.

In contrast to conditionally supported students who were responsible for their own bills (car, cell phone, and subscriptions), Eduardo managed all of these expenses along with contributing to bills for their home (gas, electric, internet, rent). Eduardo and his mom were interdependent; neither could afford to live on their own without pooling resources. Eduardo's financial responsibilities and the role he played in his household unit meant that he worked two part-time jobs and had attended college very part time for the last four years. He had not attempted any of his major coursework in chemistry or math and typically enrolled (and often withdrew from) general education classes.

Daniella, age 22, was highly entwined with her mother and sisters, and the five of them were sharing one motel room when I met her in October 2017. Like nearly one in five community college students in California, Dani was homeless after her family was evicted from their last home (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2019). Dani was partially responsible for the motel room payment, supporting not only herself, but also her mother and sisters. Dani saw her family expenses as shared between herself and her mom, who both lived paycheck-to-paycheck:

> I do help her with the room amount. Somedays I get paid one week, then she gets paid the next week. Sometimes our pay schedules coincide, so it's like we're kinda broke together. But sometimes I'll get paid, and then that will get us through until her pay period, getting the stuff we need like toilet paper, food, stuff like that.

Dani's mother was unable to support her financially, and Dani felt obligated to pitch in money to help support her mom and sisters. To make ends meet, Dani paid for expenses during the weeks when her mom's bank account is empty. Of course, without money in savings to weather the highs and lows of their hourly earnings, this strategy did not always work out, and sometimes Dani and her mother went "broke together." Dani was attending school while being both food and housing insecure. Dani's family web was supportive in the sense that her mother supported

her academic achievement, but overall her family web constrained her because family financial obligations pulled her away from school and into employment. To afford her rent, Dani worked as many hours as she was allowed at her student internship, a significant disruption from taking more classes or being a full-time student.

Students and parents relied on each other to strategize through the ebbs and flows of monthly income. Mahlia, 20 years old, bought a used car and was having trouble affording her car payment. Her parents could loan her the money to make the car payment, but only until their own bills came due.

> But my parents were like, "OK, we'll figure it out. We don't have this stuff due until this time. So we're going to help you out here. But then I need the money back from you. When you get paid, you owe me this much. I'll give you this much for now to cover it, but I need it back on this day." So it's just playing like a game of chess back and forth, trying to make a move.

Mahlia and her parents engaged in a family juggling act—strategizing about how to pay their bills based on when they got paid in the month and when their bills were due. The collective worry of making ends meet weighed heavily on students' conscience. Living paycheck-to-paycheck meant that students in interdependent families were exposed to a lot of volatility within their households. Both Dani and Mahlia moved involuntarily multiple times since enrolling at Summit View, and often failed and withdrew from classes.

Students who were supporting spouses or children often had significant financial commitments and worked full time. Joyce, age 23, rented an apartment with her husband and their six-year-old daughter, who was born in their sophomore year of high school. Like other parenting students, Joyce's primary financial obligation was not to her parents, but to her husband and daughter. She enrolled in college full time so that she could receive the full amount of financial aid and use that income to support her family. "Since I was going to school, I

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couldn't work as much, so I had no choice. I needed financial aid just to keep me going through the semester." As I describe in detail in Chapter 3, students' significant financial responsibilities to their families led them to work full time.

Paula, a 32-year-old student, was interdependent with her husband and children. She had significant financial obligations to her kids that led her to work full time, but also received financial support from her husband. Paula's family web was constantly shifting, and she experienced housing instability including moving in with her family because of financial problems. Since her most recent return to college, Paula went from living with her parents, to living in her own apartment, to linking up with her boyfriend, which brought her to a much more stable place financially, especially after she and her husband got married and bought a house. During our interview, I asked Paula to point to her income on a scale:

> When you and I first started talking, [my income] was at like 19 [thousand dollars], just me. I had disability, but I only got 70 percent disabled. I was only getting $1300, if that. Now with me by myself, I'm at like 80 [thousand dollars a year], just myself with my disability and my current income.

With the support of her family web through her husband's income, Paula had a much higher level of prosperity and stability, allowing her to slow down and assess whether she wanted to continue working as a vocational nurse, finish the pharmacy technology certificate she started at a for-profit vocational school, or return to community college to finish her AA degree in sociology.

Amanda, age 29, gave financial support to her husband and daughter and received financial support from her parents, demonstrating the intergenerational complexities of students' family webs. In the first semester when I met her, she lived with her husband and two-year-old daughter, in a house owned by her parents. But even with a discount on rent, Amanda and her husband barely broke even each month and not able to put anything towards their debt ($26,000

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in credit card debt, car payments, and student loans). She described, "Sometimes it's really tight. We always make it work. But I always tell my husband, 'I'm tired of feeling like we're drowning and then we come afloat, we're drowning and then we come afloat.'" To help relieve financial stress, Amanda and her husband relied on the support of her family web, moving in with her parents at the end of the fall semester. And while her parents' house was overcrowded (Amanda and her husband sleep on a converted patio), her parents did not charge them rent or utilities, providing them with financial support. This may have prevented Amanda from dropping out, since, rather than working full time, she was able to stay enrolled and cut down on her expenses with her parents' help.

Carework and Practical Assistance

Interdependent students carried significant carework responsibilities, providing full-time childcare for their own children or family members, shopping and preparing meals, and running errands. Lashonda, age 39, lived with and cares for her mother, who had hypertension and lymphedema, which affected her mobility. Lashonda was essentially a nurse for her mother, wrapping and massaging her legs for an hour or two each day, icing and massaging her hips, and driving her mom to medical appointments. She woke up two to three times a night to check her mom's blood pressure, which left her exhausted and sleep deprived. Caring for her mother was "like another job to me." In addition to her mom, Lashonda also watched her niece and nephew, and her carework responsibilities piled on, constraining her capacity to focus on her own personal and academic goals: "I feel like I'm always having to sacrifice. I love my niece and nephews and stuff, but sometimes I'm doing too much for family members, so I don't have time for myself." Between her part-time job and carework responsibilities, Lashonda could only

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attend Summit View part time and regularly failed and withdrew from classes because these responsibilities directly (through scheduling conflicts) or indirectly (through exhaustion) diminished her ability to meet course requirements.

Harmony, an 18-year-old student who rented a mobile home with her parents, had regular family responsibilities—such as running errands and going to pay bills with her family—and she was beholden to family members when unexpected crises arose. In her first semester, Harmony's sister was in a car accident that left her badly injured and unable to use the left side of her body. Harmony and her parents spent about 20 hours a week taking her to physical therapy, cooking for her, picking up her prescriptions at the pharmacy, and trying to get her a new car for when she could eventually return to work. "There's physical therapy appointments, then…we'd go to the grocery store and cook. Or if she needed any help, we'd pass by her apartment real [sic] quick, make sure she was okay for the whole day, so she didn't have to get up and make food." Harmony was enmeshed with her family. While they shopped for and cooked her food and gave her rides to and from school, she, in turn, was liable to help with family emergencies.

Arianna's family web included both of her adult siblings and their families. Arianna, age 22, lived with her sister's family and, in lieu of rent, helped out with her niece and nephew, running errands and taking them out to eat. She was also entwined with her brother's family; Arianna watched his 9-month old daughter on weekdays until 4:30 p.m., and while he paid her a stipend, it was barely enough to pay her bills and "more of a favor to help out with family." Arianna recognized that these responsibilities impeded her ability to take classes, and as long as she continued to help him, it would delay her progress towards her nursing degree.

> I at least told him, one more semester and then I probably will have to do more school-related stuff. Because when I take care of my niece, I'm only allowed—or not allowed, but with the time, I can only take two classes, and that kind of slows me down a bit. And I really want to get my degree and start working.

Caring for her niece prolongs Arianna's time to degree, and Arianna recognized that she could not continue to provide this help permanently. Arianna considered ending her carework arrangement with her brother, leaving the community college, and enrolling in a for-profit nursing program. Even though it would be more expensive, Arianna was drawn to the messaging on the for-profit college website that she could earn "a nursing degree, but a bachelor's, in three years." Arianna was conscious of how work and family obligations had already prolonged her enrollment and hoped to finish quickly, "the sooner the better."

Parenting students managed school with daycare picks up and drops offs, meetings at school, preparing meals, bedtime, and many other responsibilities. Tracy, a 41-year-old student, lived in an intergenerational household with her parents, brother, and six-year-old son, who attended school and daycare while she worked full time. Tracy made time in her work and school schedule for taking care of him, whether arranging weekly visitations with his father, picking up party favors for his birthday party, chaperoning their classroom trip to the pumpkin patch, or, as she describes, volunteering in his first-grade classroom: "I help out in his classroom….This teacher…she just automatically said, 'Every Thursday I need you here from 1:45 to 2:45.' Which means that every Thursday, I have to leave work at 12:45 for the rest of the day." Tracy had a well-compensated, flexible job that allowed her to leave early to meet her caretaking responsibilities and pay for daycare, and she could also rely on her parents to watch her son. Yet, even with all of her resources, Tracy felt she could only take one class a semester, either online or in the evenings, while managing her other responsibilities which considerably slowed her degree progress. She described in our first interview, "because I'm a single parent and I do have a full-time job, I'm only taking what I can handle right now. So that's about one class at a time until my son is older and he's doing more on his own, and then I can take on more."

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The extent of carework left little time for interdependent students to devote to school. While students with comprehensive support had time to do homework at the cafeteria in between classes or after school at home, parenting students did homework in the evenings after young children were in bed or during their child's naps. Describing a strategy used by nearly all parenting students, Amanda, the student who moved in with her parents, did homework for her online and evening classes "on the weekends and when my daughter's sleeping." Joyce's class schedule was dependent on her husband's work schedule and daycare availability. "Every semester, I always had to revolve around whatever my husband's schedule was and his work and the daycare." Joyce had to choose classes that were scheduled before 5:00 p.m., when daycare closed. Students with children restricted their class availability to when they did not have financial or carework responsibilities to their families, leaving a very narrow window when they could take class in person, participate in online discussions, prepare for class, or complete assignments. When students are limited to taking classes online or during a constricted time of day, they not only are able to take fewer courses, but may not be able to make smooth and consistent degree progress if their general education or major coursework is not offered online or in the necessary window.

Holly was a 34-year-old student who lived with her husband and four children, their two teenage daughters from past relationships and the two school-age kids they have together. When I first met Holly, she was working full time at a nursing facility and taking a microbiology class in the evenings. By the spring semester, Holly had dropped out of community college to attend a private, for-profit college called Straighter Line. I asked her about her decision to leave community college and the benefits of enrolling in an online school:

> The pros is that you can fit it around your schedule, no matter what time of day it is. It's definitely flexible….I was trying to find something that was gonna be a

better fit for my life at this time cause I think everyone was exhausted with my
work and school schedule and me being gone all the time.

Even the strategy of taking one class in the evenings was too difficult for Holly to manage with the obligations of her family web. Holly attempted the strategy of attending an online college to fulfill her last few nursing requirements, but a year and a half after enrolling in the classes at Straighter Line, Holly had yet to complete them and paid $100 a month to remain enrolled, many more times the cost of classes at Summit View.

Sully, age 36, and his interdependence with his girlfriend spurred a change in his academic plan. When I first met Sully, his goal was to earn an AA in human services and help youth in a direct-service role. In the second semester after Sully's girlfriend became pregnant, he curtailed his academic goals from an AA to a certificate of completion. Sully explained how attending college full time "makes no sense" after his son's birth: "Because my girlfriend is the primary—she brings in most of the money. And even if I went back to work, she still would make more than me. So it makes no sense." Sully saw himself working in the home "like stay at home moms" and returning to college when his son enrolled in school. His increasing care responsibilities after the birth of his son led him to adjust his education plan, shifting his goal from an AA degree to a certificate. Sully's family web was financially supportive—his girlfriend worked full time which allowed Sully to attend school while only working occasionally. At the same time, his full-time carework obligations after the birth of his son led him to temper his academic ambitions. For his interdependent family, Sully had to interrupt his degree progress when his family responsibilities took priority.

As with comprehensively and conditionally supported students, interdependent students could not rely on their families for academic and career guidance. Students more often recalled getting academic guidance from media sources, like TV ads or googling college names,

neighbors, coworkers, or drawing from their own knowledge and experience of colleges nearby. Mahlia planned to attend a for-profit digital arts college that contacted her while she was in high school. When I asked Mahlia if her parents helped her look at college options, she said, "they let me do it by myself…Everything's been up to me from here on out about college, so they were like, 'it's up to you, whatever you wanna do.'" Her parents took a similar approach to Mahlia's coursework at Summit View: "My mom doesn't understand the whole aspect of that, and my dad's like, 'I don't know. You take whatever you want from here on out.' I do everything on my own school-wise." Without informational support from her family web, Mahlia was left to make academic decisions on her own. Like many students without a family history of college attendance or knowledge of the US higher education system, Mahlia had difficulty choosing a major and enrolled in several unnecessary courses, extending her time to degree.

Discussion

The phenomenon of family support in college is typically depicted as a set of relationships in which resources flow from families to their children. Parents with relevant educational and cultural capital pass on their knowledge and insights, guiding their children through the processes of choosing a college, major, and career path. Parents with financial capital pay for students to live independently and fund extracurricular activities like study abroad or unpaid internships that position students to compete for professional jobs.

The sociological literature has primarily focused on dynamics of family support among middle-class students attending residential four-year colleges. My study explores these processes in the community college context, focusing on the role of families in contouring students' experiences with respect to the transmission of resources, including material, practical, and

academic. I find that college students today are deeply embedded in a dynamic *family web* that both supports and constrains students in pursuing their academic goals. I create a typology of three different types of family webs, entailing differing degrees of support and reciprocity between students and their families: comprehensive support, conditional support, and interdependent.

For comprehensively supported students, their family web was rooted in support, where their families provided complete financial support and required little or no carework or practical assistance in return. Some of these efforts included allowing students to live at home, providing childcare, and driving students to and from class. Parents also provided monetary support to cover the costs of living associated with college, and in some cases even provided students with spending money. However, in line with past research about socioeconomically disadvantaged families (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; Plank and Jordan 2001), I find that, even in comprehensively supported families, students were not able to access concrete forms of college-related information and guidance from their families. Among all families of the community college students in this study, parents were not able to provide students with specific information regarding college planning.

On the other end of the family web spectrum, interdependent students were primarily constrained by the commitments presented by their families. Interdependent students were simultaneously engaged in a double duty task of not only trying to attend college and sort out their own economic and social opportunities, but also of supporting and providing for their families' economic and social stability. Interdependent students' family ties were rooted in obligations that require students to commit time to their families, whether through working

significant hours or providing practical or carework support. Conditionally supported students experienced these demands to a lesser extent and had more financial support from their parents.

These findings fill several important gaps in the literature. By examining community college students—many of whom live locally for college and come from low-income families—I extend past research that focuses on students at residential colleges who are geographically removed from their families. As my findings demonstrate, students living at home or near their families have different social and economic realities than students who attend four-year colleges away from home. Adding to past studies, I draw on a class-diverse group of college students, many of whom are working class or poor and include students from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Importantly, these research findings in the community college context likely hold for an increasingly diverse four-year college population, including low-income students at four-year colleges and those attending commuter colleges.

The findings presented in this chapter both challenge and affirm past research. On the one hand, these findings challenge contemporary social and institutional notions of what college students are expected to do (Arnett 2004; Furstenberg Jr. et al. 2004). While it is not the modal experience of college students today, our cultural image of students in higher education portrays an independent student, living away from home with ample time for exploration and a gradual transition to adulthood. Most students in this study assumed responsibilities and financial burdens that contradict the dominant image of students in higher education who are seen as independent from their families. These findings also challenge characterizations of low-income parents in college, who are seen as taking a hands-off role in shaping students' postsecondary experiences (Hamilton 2016; Hamilton et al. 2018). While this may be true for informational support, parents in this study provided financial, practical, and carework support that was

essential for students in all types of family webs. Whether through cooking students' meals, driving them to school, or helping them troubleshoot their work and school schedules, parents and families more generally were intimately involved with making college possible for their children, spouses, or siblings.

The concept of the family web supports understandings of families from research on the life course. In line with research about families in the life course (Elder 1994; Settersten Jr. 2015b), I find that college students' lives are "linked" with those of their family members. When students live at home or in close proximity to the families, their lives are enmeshed with their parents, grandparents, siblings, nieces, and nephews (Settersten Jr. 2015b). Whether students are primarily supported or constrained by their location in the family web, students make decisions about college in the context of their families. Family relationships shaped why students went to college, how they go, and led to qualitatively different college experiences. An event happening in the life of a family member—an illness, job loss, pregnancy—has a ripple effect, creating unexpected changes in students' educational trajectories. When students are embedded in their families, their educational decisions are not made independently, but bound up in the context of their household.

The flow of resources in interdependent families mirrors support dynamics of adolescents and young adults in low-income families. There is an extensive body of research on multi-directional exchanges of resources among family members in low-income families (Edin and Lein 1997; Fuligni and Pedersen 2002; Mendenhall et al. 2012; Stack 1974; Stack and Burton 1993). In family exchange networks, members may pool resources, share expenses, or provide practical assistance like childcare, transportation, housekeeping, chores, or shopping (East, Weisner, and Reyes 2006; Seltzer and Bianchi 2013; Swartz 2009). Young adults in low-income

families are often critical sources of support to their families, contributing both financial and practical resources. My findings suggest that when young adults from these families transition to college, they continue to hold these responsibilities and are vital to the well being of their families. However, even when students combine support with their families, they continue to experience material hardship and attend college without securing their basic needs.

For conditionally supported students—and to an even greater extent for interdependent students—their academic choices are more constrained by their obligations to their families. At times, students' individual personal goals (of enrolling full time, earning an AA degree, or finishing school) were superseded by the demands of their financial and family obligations, a form of kinwork, which Stack and Burton (1993) describe as self-sacrificing work designed to insure the survival of the collective. Sully sacrificed his personal goal of finishing his AA in order to be a stay-at-home dad within his family; Lashonda's personal goal of becoming a preschool teacher was superseded by her need to care for her niece and nephew; Jessi's goal of finishing her classes was superseded by her need to perform kinwork for her uncle and mother. Family commitments can be obstacles that interfere with students' schooling—from their initial enrollment in community college, to the number of units they take while they are enrolled, and the majors and degrees they pursue.

All community college students in this study believed that their families played a role in their persistence, affecting the speed and the quality of their education. I find that family support gives students more agency in their schooling process but is not a guarantee that a student will finish college in a smooth and linear fashion. Comprehensively supported students' families provided a context for students to meet their academic goals, but even so, some lacked the interest, motivation, or determination to finish college. For students like Stephen and Eric, who

were "put on a platter" to go to college, their extensive family support enabled them to take classes and pursue their degrees with a relaxed pace without the pressure to graduate and find employment. One might predict that students with comprehensive support would have more linear trajectories and greater academic success than students from other groups. Data from my interviewees suggests this may not always be the case; some students from interdependent families were able to achieve academically in the midst of limited resources, while some comprehensively supported students took classes without making consistent progress. More research is needed to understand whether there is a relationship between how hard students need to work to support themselves financially and their college success.

Family commitments are one factor that shape students' academic choices and outcomes, explaining why students toggle between different majors, fail or drop classes, or leave community college for other kinds of postsecondary institutions. Other studies confirm respondents' accounts. A report by the Association of Community College Trustees and Single Stop USA confirms that daily activities, like family care, cause conflicts with students' college plans: "Students often drop out because the rest of students' daily activities were unable to be successfully integrated with college participation. By attending college, they forgo time usually spent caring for family members and working to support them" (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2013). Students' ability to remain enrolled in college depends on their family's stability and ability to get by as well. In documenting the consequences of students' support and obligations to their families, this study suggests that policies to support families (and not just students) are necessary for addressing low college completion rates.

For community college students, family obligations and educational success are consistently in tension with each other. Family entanglements may contribute to low community

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college completion rates because juggling family commitments take cognitive capacity, and time, and keeps students from making progress in college. Financial, practical, and carework entanglements between college students and their families may have implications for the educational outcomes of the children. The family web—the level of obligation and support in students' home setting—is a mechanism that shapes students' college experiences and outcomes.

Chapter 3: Work Flexing: How College Students Manage Employment and Academics

Work is fundamental to the lives of many undergraduate students in the United States. The working habits of students have undergone profound changes over the last several decades. The proportion of students working, and the number of hours worked, have increased since the 1970s (Fitzpatrick and Turner 2007; Riggert et al. 2006; Scott-Clayton 2012; Stern and Nakata 1991). The percentage of full-time college students who are employed has risen steadily from 36 percent in 1973 to 48 percent in 2003 (Fox, Connolly, and Snyder 2005). Over the same time period, the share of full-time college students who work at least 20 hours a week grew from 17 percent to 30 percent (Ziskin et al. 2010). The increase in working hours is not only concentrated among older, nontraditional students. Among 18- to 21-year-old college students, the average weekly hours worked increased from 9.5 hours in 1972 to 13.2 hours in 2005 (Bound et al. 2012). These statistics indicate that understanding how students manage their education while working at paid jobs is increasingly important.

Student employment is especially significant for community college students. Today, full-time students at community colleges have higher rates of employment (46.8 percent) than students at public (39.8 percent) and private (37.7 percent) four-year colleges (Snyder et al. 2019, see Table 503.20). As outlined in the introduction, the majority of community college students (63 percent) attend school part time, and among those students, 81 percent are employed with most of those working significant hours (Snyder et al. 2019, see Table 303.60). In fact, 65.7 percent of community college students attending school part time also work 20 hours a week or more (Snyder et al. 2019, see Table 503.20).

In this chapter, I document and analyze the employment experiences of community

college students, bringing to light the challenges students face in arranging paid work and school,

in the context of their family webs outlined in the previous chapter. I find that most students are

employed in precarious jobs in the retail and service sector, and like many retail and service

workers, students rarely have control over their work schedules. Students are expected to be

flexible at the whim of their employers; many students work on-call shifts (where they must be

prepared to work if asked but not paid otherwise) or are scheduled just-in-time so their hours are

closely aligned with customer demand rather than their own economic needs. Students

experience uncertainty about the amount and timing of work hours that employers will offer

from one week to the next. These scheduling practices and students' employment in bad and

precarious jobs amplify the difficulties they face in coordinating work and school. It is not only

the number of hours worked, I argue, but the characteristics of the jobs many students hold that

further complicates their ability to manage school and employment. Building on the insights

from the previous chapter, I find that, in addition to family webs, employment is a prominent

social factor that shapes academic outcomes for community college students.

Student Employment and College Success

The literature suggests that two major aspects of employment deserve attention with respect to

how work interacts with students' experiences and outcomes. First, the number of hours

(quantity) students work is associated with academic performance and shapes how students

structure their time in college, such as when they take classes and the number of hours they

spend studying. Second, where students work, namely whether they are employed on or off

campus, has been linked to academic outcomes in college. I expand on this stream of literature to

consider how the type (quality) of jobs students hold while they attend college affects their ability to schedule and take classes and sustain the physical and cognitive well-being required to make consistent academic progress.

Some researchers find that working a limited number of hours (fewer than 15 or 20 hours per week) is associated with positive outcomes, both during and after college. Working part time is associated with higher grade point averages (Dundes and Marx 2006; Gleason 1993; McCormick, Moore, and Kuh 2010; Orszag et al. 2001), and higher persistence (Horn and Berktold 1998; King 1999; Levin, Montero-Hernandez, and Cerven 2010) and graduation rates (Choy and Berker 2003; King 1999) compared to students who do not work (for an exception, see Soliz and Long 2016). Working students tend to do better in the labor market than nonworking students, earning higher salaries post-college (Ehrenberg and Sherman 1987; Gleason 1993; Titus 2010). Working part time may help students establish structure and discipline, learn about their skills and career preferences, and make contacts that help students secure work post-graduation (Cheng and Alcántara 2007; Curtis and Nimmer 1991; Dundes and Marx 2006; Gleason 1993).

Work negatively affects academic outcomes when students work long hours (20 or more). Causal studies that account for preexisting differences among students find that intensive work has negative effects on their academic performance (Dadgar 2012; DeSimone 2008; Kalenkoski and Pabilonia 2010; Stinebricker and Stinebricker 2003) and their persistence, time to degree, and degree completion (Bound et al. 2012; Bozick 2007; Ehrenberg and Sherman 1987; Titus 2010).

Why might intensive work negatively affect school? The most compelling hypothesis is that work and school compete for students' time and energy: the more time students spend at

their jobs, the less time they have for school-related activities (Baum 2006; Bozick 2007; Dundes and Marx 2006; Keith 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner 2003). Because time and energy are finite resources, significant work hours "crowd out" school time, or reduce the number of hours the student has available to attend class, study, do homework, and engage in other educational activities, including collaborating with students outside of class and interacting with students and faculty members (Bound et al. 2012; McCormick et al. 2010; Pike, Kuh, and Massa-McKinley 2009). Survey research suggests that the number of hours worked shapes the degree to which students prioritize their academic work and how they engage with school. Most students who work significant hours report that their employment restricts their choice of classes, limits the number of classes they take, and limits the time in which class can be scheduled (Horn and Malizio 1998; Orszag et al. 2001). Students who work significant hours spend less time on assignments, study fewer hours for tests, and indicate that work time curtails socializing with other students (Dundes and Marx 2006:116).

Given that working significant hours leads to poor academic outcomes, one might ask: Why do students work more hours than is ideal? As is clear from the previous chapter, for many students, working in college is not a choice, but an economic necessity. The choice to work fewer or more hours is patterned by students' social class backgrounds. While affluent students may choose to work minimally in order to support discretionary consumption (e.g., own a car) (King 1999) or gain work experience (Scott-Clayton 2012),[7] students from lower-income families often must work more hours out of necessity, to pay for essential college and living expenses. Among full-time students from four-year colleges, 58 percent of students from families in the bottom income quartile report they cannot afford school without working

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[7] Some students also work during college to gain labor market experience, acquire career-related knowledge, and establish independence in emerging adulthood (Perna 2010; Pascaraella and Terenzini 2005).

compared with 30 percent of students from the top income quartile (Scott-Clayton 2012). Students work to pay for the direct cost of attending college (e.g., tuition, fees, books, and supplies), the costs of traveling to the institution, and basic living expenses (Perna 2010; Stern and Nakata 1991). As described in the previous chapter, students also work because they have an obligation to contribute to the financial well-being of their families (King 1999). Low-income students cannot afford to attend college without working, and these issues are critical at community colleges where low-income students are concentrated.

An emergent body of literature posits that, in addition to the number of hours worked, the *quality* of jobs is associated with college students' ability to thrive and persist in college. We know comparatively little about how the qualitative aspects of students' jobs shape their work experiences and academic outcomes. Past research has limited the conceptualization of job quality to whether students are employed on or off campus (Ehrenberg and Sherman 1987; Perna 2010; Riggert et al. 2006). Jobs with an on-campus location and those connected to academic interests can shield students from the negative outcomes associated with work and even promote college attainment (Ehrenberg and Sherman 1987; Perna 2010; Scott-Clayton and Minaya 2016; Yu, McKinney, and Carales 2020).

However, these benefits extend to few students, since the vast majority of working undergraduates work off campus in the service industry (Perna, Cooper, and Li 2007). In 2003, the majority (91 percent) of working dependent undergraduates worked off campus, with only 7 percent working on campus and 2 percent working both on campus and off campus (Perna et al. 2007). In one study from Washington state, Dadgar (2012) reported that 42 percent of all working community college students were employed in the retail and accommodation and food industries. Given that student workers are concentrated in the service and retail sectors,

nationally and in my sample, it is not surprising that fewer than one in three working students believe that their job is related to their academic major (Perna 2010). Service-sector jobs are unlikely to contribute to students' development of skills or college achievement, while jobs in other industries may provide students with relevant experience towards their future careers.

Discrete aspects of employment and the organization of work in service and retail sectors (e.g., irregular hours, on-call hours, physical and emotional exertion, and unpredictability in the scheduling of their work) could be relevant for understanding whether and how students combine employment and academics. While employment uncertainty has long been a feature of low-wage jobs, the unpredictability and irregularity of employment in service and retail has intensified with just-in-time scheduling practices, long-term unemployment, and the greater prominence of temporary and contract work arrangements (Halpin and Smith 2017). Broton, Goldrick-Rab, and Benson (2016) point out that the increase in student employment has been concomitant with the decline of high-quality labor market opportunities (Kalleberg 2011). Over the same time period that student employment has risen, jobs have become more precarious with inconsistent and unpredictable hours that are often not under the control of the employee (Kalleberg 2011; Lambert, Fugiel, and Henly 2014; Presser and Ward 2011). Thus, the labor market context in the contemporary United States makes balancing work and school more difficult than it was a generation ago (Broton et al. 2016; Goldrick-Rab 2016).

Scholars have called for researchers to consider these important intervening factors in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the nature of work for students (Perna 2010). Yet few empirical studies have connected aspects of job quality to college experiences and outcomes, with a few important exceptions. In *Paying the Price,* Sara Goldrick-Rab describes student workers employed in stressful, demanding jobs where students have their shifts cancelled

suddenly, are sent home early, or have to be "on call" without compensation for extended shifts, leaving little time for studying (Goldrick-Rab 2016:108-112). Broton et al. (2016) suggest that students are aware of some aspects of job quality, such as whether shifts are scheduled in the morning hours or overnight, paying particular attention to the challenges created by working nonstandard hours (e.g., nightshifts, weekends) but not unpredictable hours (the uncertainty of working time). When students receive grant aid, they not only reduce the number of hours they work, but also work fewer early morning or late evening shifts, which can cut into students' time to sleep or study (Broton et al. 2016). Other research suggests that the manual and emotional labor required in many service jobs wears down students' bodies, leading to exhaustion and difficulty focusing on school (Wood, Harrison, and Jones 2016).

While prior research has primarily distinguished between on- and off-campus work as a component of job quality, a broader conception of job quality—including work schedule and timing of shifts, flexibility, and autonomy—may also be important for student workers and shape the extent to which students can juggle work and school successfully. I build on these insights, arguing that these qualitative aspects of students' jobs explain their ability to manage their school, familial, and work obligations. I start by describing dimensions of job quality identified by student workers in interviews. I then show how students engaged in a complicated juggling act, managing the demands and stresses of both school and work. I show that students took steps to adjust their work to their school and personal schedules, a process I call *work flexing*.[8] I explain three primary strategies for flexing—scheduling, school reductions, and work reductions—students used to reconcile their work and school schedules. Students' family and

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[8] As I go on to describe, the process of "flexing" is not a positive process, but one that is forced, painful, and difficult to navigate. Students report that flexing has negative implications for both employment and academic outcomes. Scheduling manipulations make it challenging for students to earn consistent pay and put their jobs at risk. Work flexing is also a demanding and time-consuming process that hurts students' academic performance.

financial context and the quality of their jobs shaped their ability to orchestrate work and school effectively. Finally, I discuss students' understanding of the academic outcomes of their employment.

Dimensions of Job Quality for Student Workers

In my sample of community college students, all but one student[9] was employed at some point over the study period and students worked 24 hours a week on average. The interviews revealed that students held three distinct kinds of jobs, with nearly half of students combining multiple jobs. A clear majority of students (24 students or 80 percent) worked in low-wage service or manual labor jobs, including retail, food service, office occupations, or manual labor (such as landscaping or house cleaning). Also included in this category are students who did app-based gig work or were self-employed. A second set of students (six students or 20 percent) held jobs in healthcare, teaching, or other fields that were slightly more desirable than retail or food-service jobs. Seven students (23 percent) held on-campus jobs or student internships at some point over the study period, working in student support offices at Summit View (such as the financial aid office, transfer center, or child development center) or for the State of California in a student internship. Additionally, one student in this group, Tracy, was working full time for the State of California in a job with high earnings and stability. However, many students, even those who worked significant hours, continued to struggle to have enough money for food, housing, and school expenses.

Table 3.1: Students' employment characteristics, by number of students and percentages (in parentheses)

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[9] Tommy was not employed or looking for work because he received financial aid, lived at home, and was supported by his parents. He feels his family is "in a financially stable environment where I don't need to have a job." Tommy also spends several hours a week caring for his younger sibling.

Sector of employment	
On-campus job or state internship	7 (23)
Healthcare or teaching job	6 (20)
Retail or food-service job	24 (80)
Weekly number of hours worked in last semester	
0 hours	4 (13)
1- 9 hours	3 (10)
10-19 hours	5 (17)
20-29 hours	13 (43)
30 or more hours	5 (17)
Held more than 1 job while in college	13 (43)

Note: Students count in multiple categories for sector of employment, since some students held more than one job. Number of hours worked during the last semester when the student was enrolled in community college.

Beyond whether students work on or off campus, I found five components of job quality that affected students' ability to manage their academic performance: (1) the degree of schedule predictability, (2) the physical and emotional demands of their job, (3) the ease of transition between school and work, (4) the extent to which the job provided a meaningful labor market experience, and (5) the degree to which employers were understanding of students' academic goals.

Students varied in the degree of autonomy, control, and flexibility they held over their work schedules. Varied hourly scheduling is a characteristic of many retail and service-industry jobs that requires flexibility on the part of the student, rather than the employer. A schedule like Christiana's was common, where students might know what days they would work, but not when they would be scheduled. Christiana, age 22, lived with her mother and father (who is disabled), younger brother, and grandmother. Since she enrolled at Summit View College, Christiana has worked 35 hours a week at a local grocery chain as a clerk and floral arranger. She typically worked the same days of the week, but her hours varied widely:

So usually I'll work Sundays and Mondays, 8 to 5 because I'm in the floral

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department and that's just steady. Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, it fluctuates throughout the day 'cause I'm free those days. It depends on what they need…I could have a 6 to 3 shift. I could have a 3 to 11 shift.

Students' hours ranged widely without notice, and employers maintained control over work activities rather than students. Eduardo rented a duplex with his mom and, to pay for their expenses, worked two jobs: as a server at a chain restaurant and a student advisor at the transfer center. Eduardo restricted his restaurant work to evenings and weekends yet had only taken one or two classes a semester since he enrolled in community college four years ago. In the first interview, Eduardo estimated he was working six to 15 hours a week at his restaurant job; by the third interview he was working 20 to 25 hours a week. Most of the forces that dictated how much Eduardo worked were outside of his control including which manager was making the schedule, how many employees were working on a given night, and, as he pointed out, how busy the restaurant was.

It fluctuates based on the shift, and it's completely customer driven. So if we are having a very busy night, my nights there will be longer. If it's not such a busy night, they'll start cutting servers off the schedule. And it just depends where I am in the lineup. So it's typically the first person in is the first person out. So the earlier I clock in, the earlier I'd be getting out. Last night I worked about a three-hour shift.

For most students like Eduardo who worked in retail or service, their work hours were unpredictable and controlled by their employers. Other students' work schedules varied with the seasonality of their work. For the many students who worked in retail jobs, holiday sales (black Friday and Christmas) corresponded with finals week, meaning that students concomitantly experienced the intense demands of school and work. When asked how many hours she worked in a typical week, Mahlia, a 20-year-old retail worker who attended college part time, said, "Hours a week? I have no idea. Because right now we're on holiday schedule, so next week I work 33 and a half. But that's if they need me, but we're probably going to be there all day."

Most students were unable to depend on working a set number of hours or days from week to week. As Eduardo and Mahlia's schedules demonstrate, even when students were scheduled to work on a particular day, they had no autonomy or control over the length of the shift.

On-call jobs introduced a great deal of uncertainty in the number of hours students worked. Students were regularly given only a few days' notice of the work schedule. Lashonda, 39-years-old, came to college later in life after working "the same odd, dead-end jobs" at restaurants, warehouses, call centers, and department stores. Lashonda had been enrolled at Summit View for four years studying early childhood education and had held a series of assistant preschool teacher jobs, changing jobs more than four times in two years. She explained about her hours as a substitute preschool teacher:

> It's sporadic. It can be 3 hours one day and 4 hours the next. It all depends on what their need is. If someone is not there, they need me from 8 to 12 or 1 to 3….I have to go on the computer every day and see if they have a job, and then I would send it. Or it would be the night before. For some reason, they never have it in advance—a week in advance so I can actually put [on my schedule] the days that I can work. It's always the day before or the night before.

Because the availability of Lashonda's work was driven by teachers calling out, she lacked a regular, consistent work schedule around which to arrange her academic obligations.

While scheduling unpredictability was common across retail and service jobs, it did not affect all students in the same way. Students with substantial family and financial support (most often, those in the comprehensively supported group) could weather some degree of unpredictability. Demond, age 19, had difficulty finding employment after he was charged with a misdemeanor in 2016, but between support from his grandmother, a retired state worker, and an inheritance from his father, working was not a financial necessity for Demond. In his last year at Summit View, Demond was hired through a friend to work as an administrator at a testing

center. His hours were unpredictable, but he did not mind since he was supported by his family

and used his work income for spending money.

> Wednesdays and Fridays are 3 p.m. to 10….I was a little stressed out when I saw
> the schedule, I was like "what?! Three to how long?" I got in there and I was like
> "they're not leaving anywhere around 10." We're leaving closer to 8 or 7
> sometimes. It's a testing center, so….once the last person is finished, we as
> employees are able to leave.

Demond's job was characterized by a lack of control and uncertainty over the hours he worked.

His job shared the quality of unpredictability described previously, but because of his supportive

family web, he was untroubled when his hours were cut short.

Other students held off-campus jobs with high levels of autonomy that gave them control

over their schedules. When students had the discretion to work hours of their choosing, they

were better able to maintain control over their school schedules, including class and study time.

Jessi, age 32, lived in an apartment paid for by her mother and worked as a caretaker for her

disabled uncle, where she was paid by a state program for in-home support services.

> You set your own hours with this program. You don't have any, "you have to be
> there between 8 o'clock and 5 o'clock," or something like that. I set my own
> hours. So for instance, one of my duties for him is to grocery shop for him, make
> sure he has toiletries and things like that. Well, I can do that when I'm doing my
> own grocery shopping. So kill two birds with one stone.

Like the jobs described previously, Jessi's work was low paying, and did not offer benefits or job

security, but her job was distinguished by the fact that she could choose the days and hours when

she worked, leaving more time in which to take class or study. Joyce, a 23-year-old who lived

with her husband and daughter, worked with her mom as a housecleaner for about 30 hours a

week, in addition to taking classes full time towards her AAT degree in Spanish. She adjusted

her clients around her school schedule every semester, since she was self-employed.

BH: How did you figure out your work and school schedule this semester?

Joyce: I did the school schedule first; work schedule comes after. So classes are necessary. And even though work is necessary, the work is more flexible than classes.

BH: Yeah. You can kind of move clients around?

Joyce: Yes, because my mom…She understands, she wants me to finish school. She's more than willing to try and accommodate anything I need.

Joyce illustrates how students made their paid work adapt to their schoolwork thus created more ideal circumstances for academic success. Because Joyce controlled her schedule, she was able to prioritize her school schedule before work.

In good student jobs, employers were flexible to students' schedules. Capturing a common sentiment from on-campus workers in this study, Harmony, a student worker in the financial aid office, said "That's one thing I really like about the office. They let you make your schedule." Daniella experienced turbulence in her home life (moving from a hotel room, to her aunt's house, and then to an apartment), but her employment was much more stable; she began a student internship with the state in the first semester of the study. As a state intern, Daniella was able to decrease her hours at work to focus on school, as she did during a semester when she was enrolled in eight-week courses. When she wanted to earn more money, she was able to increase her hours at work, such as during school breaks. The state office accommodated her changes and rarely asked her to work additional hours.

[My boss] said, "yeah, for now, just enjoy working the maximum hours until you start [classes]." So that's what I did. I worked the max. I worked the whole 29 [hours]. And then once school started, I was like "Okay, no more 29." More like 20 now. Maybe less when finals come around, probably like 18. 'Cause the minimum we have to [work] is 16 hours. So that's basically two eight-hour shifts.

Dani's employer did shape when she worked (since the office was open on weekdays from 8 to 5), and because her position was a student internship, she was restricted to working between 16 and 29 hours a week. But, as long as she satisfied those requirements, the office catered to her

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needs: working less during periods when school was demanding. Students' autonomy and control over their work hours is a key quality of a good student job.

Second, student jobs varied in the extent to which their work was physically and emotionally demanding. Some students, especially men in this study, worked in physically demanding jobs (e.g., cooking, moving boxes, mowing lawns, and stocking shelves) and as a result were often drained by the end of their shifts, which negatively affected the time needed to sleep, study, and complete homework. Students who worked in the interactive service industry were required to manage their emotions in accordance with employers' expectations. Eduardo's restaurant job required him to put on "a façade," or an appropriate emotional display of smiling and being friendly when interacting with customers.

> It's putting on a I. It is, coming up to each table and giving that super happy greeting, even though your feet hurt, you've got 20 other tables that are screaming your name because they need something.. And so…by the end of the night, you come home just utterly exhausted.

Part of the exhaustion of working was not only the number of hours that Eduardo worked, but the physical exertion ("your feet hurt") and having to produce a certain emotional state ("happy greeting"), which was common among students doing restaurant work, fast food, retail sales, and customer service. Mahlia's job at a retail store at the mall required not only that she sold a product, but that she interacted with kids and their parents.

> It can be exhausting, because our job, as much as it looks easy from the outside, working it is very, very tiring. Because we're not just dealing with the kids. We're dealing with the kids, the parents, product, and then everything on top of that. So we're having to do a lot of stuff together with the kids, and we're helping the kids, we're talking to them.

The service of doing activities, helping, and talking to children—the social interaction—played an important role in the delivery of the service at the kids' retail store where Mahlia worked. In contrast, this type of physical and emotional exertion was not a distinctive feature of

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administrative work in on-campus jobs or state internships. Daniella, age 22, recalled a past retail job where she was standing all day, and how her current school-sponsored internship with the State of California was "very relaxed."

> So, I'm working at the Secretary of State. Basically I just deal with documents. It's very boring, but honestly, when you've worked retail and food, boring is amazing. My boss keeps telling me, "Are you bored yet? Are you bored yet?" I'm like, "No, I like this. This is nice." I'm not working Black Friday. I'm not scanning clothes all day standing. This is really nice. I really like it. Very relaxed.

Daniela explicitly compared her current job with her past experience in retail and food. Rather than "standing" all day, Dani's administrative work was boring, but "very relaxed." When students could perform their jobs with ease, it freed up their energy and attention to focus on the demands of being a college student. Jobs that were more demanding, physically or emotionally, drained students' energy and were therefore less compatible with school.

A third dimension of student job quality was the ease of the transition between school and work. Students who worked on campus benefit from cutting down on time changing clothes and driving between work, school, and home. Working on campus also allowed students to work shorter shifts, since students could work briefly between classes, maximizing the efficiency of earning money and attending school. Conversely, students who worked off campus took additional time and mental planning to transition from school to work. Mahlia was financially interdependent with her parents and had been working 20 to 30 hours a week since she first enrolled at Summit View College two years ago. Mahlia's mom helped her figure out the maximum number of hours that she could work around her school schedule, taking into account the time it took her to commute to work, which was 35 minutes or up to two hours with traffic. She described how scheduling for work extended beyond the hours of her work shift.

> We wrote out my school schedule, and then under it, my mom helped me write out my availability for work. She's like, "OK, let's think about it because it takes

> you this much time to get to school, this much time from work and school. This is how many hours you have between them." So certain days, like on Fridays. It's like, "OK, you start school at 9 o'clock and end at 1:10….So you could work [starting] about 3 o'clock."

While Mahlia's parents left her entirely on her own for choosing coursework, her family web played a key role in helping her manage work and school. Mahlia's long commute and unpredictable traffic were qualities that made managing school and employment more complicated for her. Switching between activities was a burden for students on a daily basis as they figured out the timing of changing clothes, driving to and from different places, and mentally preparing to do the next activity. The logic Eduardo, the 20-year-old student who worked two jobs, outlined below was typical of the decision-making process that students went through when they were tightly scheduled between work and school.

> Sometimes I would have a shift [at the restaurant] scheduled right after class or right after work at the transfer center. So it was, "do I have to pack my work clothes in my car so I can change when I get there? Or do I have time to run home, take a breather, and then change at home and go to work?"

Here, the first dimension of job quality—schedule predictability—intersected with the ease of transition between work and school. Eduardo's volatile hours at the restaurant meant that he did not have a consistent schedule week to week and therefore could not efficiently plan for when and how to prepare to transition from school to work.

Fourth, students' work also varied on whether jobs provided skills, exposure to workplaces, future career opportunities, or clear paths to promotion. On-campus jobs provided meaningful labor market experiences, giving students insight into potential careers or insider knowledge about colleges and universities. As an employer, college and state offices provided access to good jobs that were reliable, flexible, and offered higher wages than jobs off campus. Even if the tasks they perform were rote, the professional connections on campus or at the state

could lead to opportunities for permanent, full-time positions after graduation.[10] Harmony is one such student whose job provided valuable professional experience. She lived with her parents in a mobile home, and despite their family struggles to make ends meet, Harmony did not feel pressured by her parents to find work; they wanted her to focus on being a student. Nevertheless, in her first semester, Harmony applied for a work-study job in the campus financial aid office because she wanted to be more involved on campus and believed her work provided knowledge about college processes. When asked about why she was working, Harmony expressed:

> Harmony: Just work experience. Just trying to get into the work field, help out. And I wanted an on-campus job because I know it would be flexible with my hours. And I didn't want a job like—working at Taco Bell—fast food restaurant or anything like that.
>
> BH: How come?
>
> Harmony: Because I feel like here, I'm learning something out of it. I'm learning how all this process works…When I finally transfer, I'll kinda have a sense of how to go about things. It's actually helping me out in the long-run.

Harmony saw her job as not only a way to earn money, but to help students, gain work experience, and better understand financial aid in the postsecondary system. It was common for students working in on-campus jobs to believe their work shaped their academic interests and career choices. Danika, a middle-class student, was in her second year at Summit View College. She was working in a student internship in the Employment Development Department and hoped to work for the State of California after her graduation. As she told me, "I was thinking of getting my business degree and then moving up within the state and finding another—some type of job in the state because there's a lot of those. And once you're in the state, you can be moving up."

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[10] At least one student, Daniella, was brought on in a permanent, full-time position in the same office where she held an internship the year after this study ended. She continued taking community college courses online while working. Another participant, Danika, planned to keep her state internship after she transferred from Summit View to the local state college. She hopes to pursue a career in accounting and was able to work for a state office in their accounting department.

The benefits of Danika's student internship with the state were twofold: it provided flexibility and earnings now while she finished college and was a way to get her foot in the door for a career after she graduates.

Finally, student jobs varied in the extent to which they allowed students to take time away from work to address their academic goals. The more inflexible an employer was about allowing the student worker to take time off to study or prepare, the harder it was for the student to put in the necessary quality work on their school activities. Eduardo, for example, had difficulty adjusting his hours at the restaurant to meet his academic demands. When he could not find a coworker to cover his shift, he resorted to pulling all-nighters or waking up early to study. When I asked him if work and school ever conflict, admitted "they do sometimes."

> In terms of assignments and stuff like that, they do sometimes. And so I will try to either get my shifts covered, try to call in sick for a shift and have another coworker cover it. And if that's not a possibility, it's the all-nighter thing of, I'll do part of my assignments or my studying at night. Get a few hours of sleep and then wake up early in the morning to finish it.

For students like Eduardo in food service, their employer's priority was cost and operating efficiencies, not their employees' academic goals. If Eduardo needed to prioritize an assignment, the burden fell on him to manage his shift coverage or lose sleep. In contrast, Tracy was in a very privileged position when it came to her work. Despite having only a high school diploma and some college coursework, she had a stable, full-time job with the State of California, earning nearly six figures. Tracy attended college for her own enjoyment, taking one class a semester in the evenings or online towards a geology degree. Tracy flexed her school schedule to prioritize her paid work, but Tracy's manager was also flexible with her academic requirements. Whenever Tracy had a big exam or quiz, she requested paid time off from work to study, which she did about three times a semester. She explained:

> Whenever I have a final exam or big quiz, I request time off, so I could study. And for the most part, my manager has been very accommodating. So I've been very, very fortunate with that. So December 13th is my final exam and it's on campus at 5, so I took the day off. I have the day scheduled to stay home and study.

Few students, typically those who worked on campus or in a school sponsored internship had a "very accommodating" manager who understood and encouraged them to pursue their academic goals, like Tracy described above. Students who had employers that allowed them to take time off to study made it easier for them to manage the more demanding weeks of the semester, such as midterms or final exams.

Work Flexing: Strategies for Managing School and Work

Given the variation in how much they worked and in what kinds of jobs, I found that students employed three different strategies for overseeing paid work and academic demands. First, students structured time as a basic strategy to manage work, family, and college demands, engaging in intensive time management of their obligations. Students employed various strategies including reserving certain days or times for work or taking classes online. Structuring time was used across all students, regardless of their reasons for working, the number of hours they worked, or the type of job they held. Second, students found ways to reduce their school load by skipping class for work, stopping out of school to work, or in the most extreme cases, dropping out of school to work. This strategy was favored by conditionally supported and interdependent students, those without substantial family support who were often responsible for paying their own college expenses. Finally, comprehensively supported students, those with more family resources, also had the option of reducing their work hours to focus on school. For these students, work was not a significant obligation that shaped their time use while in college.

The concept of *work flexing* provides a way of understanding this constellation of strategies and the time and energy required to manage paid employment outside of the hours that students' are scheduled to work. I find that students not only spend hours at work but engage in additional unrecognized and uncompensated labor of managing work and school schedules.

Structuring Time

The most common time-structuring pattern was dividing the week day-by-day in regular patterns. This took the form of planning for classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays only, for example, to reserve Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for work and other responsibilities. One participant, Eric, a 22-year-old from a comprehensively supported family who worked at a fast-casual restaurant, described a familiar pattern of weekdays focused on schoolwork and a part-time job scheduled primarily for the weekend: "Right now, I close from 4 to 9 on Friday, Saturday, Sunday." Joyce, who managed classes with house cleaning and childcare for her six-year-old daughter, stacked her classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays: "I tried to keep certain dates open so I could work on those days. I tried to put the four classes I have in two days a week. So, currently all my classes are Tuesdays and Thursdays." It was typical for students to restrict school to certain days of the week, or restrict their working availability to days when classes were not offered.

Some students used the strategy of dividing classes and work hour-by-hour, taking class only at certain times to accommodate work (e.g., only taking classes in the morning and working in the evening). Amanda exemplifies a pattern about how a regular school day was impacted by students' work schedules. A paraeducator with a 2-year-old daughter, Amanda worked nearly full time and reserved the evenings for taking classes.

OK, so Mondays and Wednesdays…I wake up, get my daughter ready in the morning. She wakes up about 6:30. So I try to get up at around 6 o'clock so I have time to get myself completely ready and then I focus on her. Because then I still have to make breakfast, make my lunch, [and] make sure I have my school stuff because I usually have class right after work…I work 8 to 2:30 Monday through Friday. Monday, Wednesday I work that time and then I have class from 3:30 to 5 o'clock.

Amanda structured her day hour-by-hour, considering both her family commitments (getting her daughter ready and making her breakfast) along with her paid work and school obligations when structuring time. Other students, like Danika, chose morning classes to "get them out of the way" and worked in the afternoons and evenings.

I chose classes early to get them out of the way….And so I figured, OK. So I get out at 1:20. I could make it to the state job by 2 o'clock to work there every day from 2 to 5, till they closed. And then I told my RoundTable job, "OK. So I got a new job and I get off at 5. During the weekdays Monday through Friday, I'll only be able to start at 6 o'clock. That's the earliest I can start, weekdays at 6 o'clock."

Limiting course taking to one time of day may be convenient for work, but was not necessarily helpful for Danika's academic progress, as the need to fit in school during a certain time of day limited her enrollment. Other students worked at night—sometimes late into the evening—so they could focus on school during the day. Amandeep, age 27, was married and attended school full time, working towards her transfer requirements to complete a degree in accounting. Previously, Amandeep earned a vocational nursing certificate from a private, for-profit college and now worked as an in-home nurse. Her shift was from 4 p.m. until midnight, so she was free to take classes during the day:

It's a lot easier to get classes during the day than it is at night, so that's part of why. Because nursing's 24 hours a day, seven days a week for some patients. So I really could have picked whatever type of schedule I wanted because I could switch patients if I needed to fit my schedule better…I know for a fact, there's way more classes available during the day than there are in the evenings. So I just picked a work schedule that was at night, so I could go school during the day.

Across all strategies for managing time, whether a particular day of the week or time of day, students' employment constrained their availability for taking classes and therefore limited their availability for registering for general education and major requirements. When students could only sign up for classes in one segment of time, it limited their academic progress. Not all of the classes they needed were offered in the window of time they had set aside to adjust schooling around their work schedule.

Students flexed their schedules around work by taking class online to cut down on travel time between work and school, another strategy for structuring time. Online classes were an interesting and novel method for structuring time that cut down on time spent traveling to and from classes and allowed students flexibility to engage with course content asynchronously. The ability to take classes online is a relatively new phenomenon and one used by several working students, especially those with carework responsibilities. Joyce, who worked as a housecleaner to support her daughter, switched to taking online classes to spend more time at work after her husband lost his job.

> BH: Do you take a lot of online classes?

> Joyce: Not normally, I did it this semester so that I could work more and make more money, but it's really beating me. It's rough, but it's working. And I prefer that than having to come [to school] in the mornings and knowing I have no money to pay my bills.

Taking classes online allowed Joyce to work more hours—in the mornings—than she otherwise would were she attending classes during that time. This example shows us how students used the strategy of taking online classes to adapt, structuring school and work time around family demands, in this case when Joyce's partner loses his job.

There were limits to how far students could manipulate and structure their paid work around school. In some cases, the pressures became too strong and students decided to abandon

the community college altogether. For example, Holly, a nursing administrator, left the community college and enrolled at a for-profit online school called Straighter Line University to find more balance between her school, work, and family responsibilities.

> [In-person classes] made it hard because the kids were wanting me home and I already was gone so much for work. But I think everybody had to struggle with it. I had noticed the younger girls were more emotional than normal. That's why I did the online classes this time, to see if maybe that would help balance out, work life balance a little bit.

Holly's example illustrates how when students could not adapt work to school, they adapted their school to fit their work needs; in this case, Holly sought an online-only institution as a strategy for structuring her time. While leaving the community college is an extreme example, students might be pressured to take certain types of classes, or delay completing course requirements because they do not meet their scheduling needs. In these ways, scheduling time is a strategy for managing work and employment that could inhibit academic success.

Reducing School

Second, when they could not schedule around them, students reduced their academic responsibilities to create space for paid work. Students intentionally took fewer units, reducing their credit load even if it meant extending their time to degree. Eduardo shows that students' enrollment intensity was not based on the classes they need but, "A lot of it has to do with my work schedule—seeing what will fit in where and seeing if I'm going to be sacrificing paychecks to take this class or not." Eduardo curtailed the number of classes he took in a given semester based on his work schedule. As an interdependent student, school was something Eduardo worked to "fit in" around his employment.

Students skipped class to take additional work shifts. Harlan worked as much as he could because expenses like a backpack and school supplies, bike repairs, groceries, and rent were solely his responsibility. Because Harlan's survival depended on his paycheck, work took priority over school. He admitted that he took on an additional shift and missed an assignment due date.

> Actually, for example, Halloween, [my boss] was telling me, "Man, I do want you to go to school, but I really need you on this day." And I was like, "alright, cool" and I decided to do it. And yeah, I missed class because of that. And that was a very important day for me to go to that class that day…We had a seven-page essay due.

Harlan's inconsistent class attendance meant that he had difficulty managing assignment due dates and "barely managed" to pass his two classes. Alexa was a comprehensively supported student, who admitted that school was "not my thing," and often missed class to attend modeling auditions. While her parents could fully support her financially, Alexa's disinterest in school led her to prioritize work.

> Alexa: It's been hectic…trying to balance out being available for auditions…So I have that one eight-week course that falls on Tuesdays….I've [only] been to that class twice because every Tuesday I've had a commercial to shoot. Next Tuesday I shoot in San Francisco. And then the next Tuesday after that I shoot again.
>
> BH: Tell me about how you're balancing work and school right now.
>
> Alexa: I'm not. It's not balanced. It's literally all over the place.

Another way of accommodating work and school was to leave school during a time of year when work was busy. Students intentionally adjusted their school schedules based on seasonal changes at work. Some students planned to stop out of school seasonally during a time of year when work was busiest. Mahlia, an interdependent student, did not take summer school because she knew she could be scheduled for more hours in the summer at the mall where she worked in a kids' retail store. As she told me, "I don't do summer semester because I don't have time because

that's when I work the most, because that's when all the kids are out so we are nonstop

packed…Summer is really packed for us. So I'm always working." Dave, who was living with

his parents while he completed his transfer requirements for viticulture, took fewer classes in the

fall because he knew his seasonal job at a winery would be busy during the grape harvest. Dave

recognized that with his work demands in the fall, he could only take one class because he

needed time to work and also to rest afterwards to "not be tired from working."

> Basically what it comes down to is that these classes are so difficult for me, that I
> need that time. I need that time to not be working and not be tired from
> working….If I'm in a calculus class or physics class and it's important to me to
> get an A, I need to spend days studying. Not a couple hours here and there
> studying. I need to spend days studying. That's what my priority is.

The option of intentionally planning to stop out of school for a semester in order to work was a

strategy made possible by the institutional organization of the community college, one that

allowed students to reduce their involvement in school temporarily without penalty. Through

taking fewer classes, skipping class, or simply not enrolling, students' need to manage

employment pressured them to make choices that were at odds with academic progress.

Reducing Work

Third, more privileged students could reduce work hours to fit in school responsibilities, a

strategy most often employed by comprehensively supported students who had the family and

financial support to prioritize class and study time over paid work. Students with more resources,

most often conditionally and comprehensively supported students, did not mind if they were

released early from a shift and could leave a job if it was no longer compatible with their school

schedule.

Ashika lived with her parents and when she started community college two years ago, also started a job at a retail store. She did not mind if she worked fewer hours and got a small paycheck, as long as there was "something there" to help her afford school. She put the majority of her paycheck into a savings account which she was setting aside for tuition and room and board when she transferred. When I asked if she ever had to choose between work and school, she disclosed, "I would choose school. I wouldn't go into work that day. I don't care if I get a small paycheck, at least it's a paycheck. Something there to help me afford school." Ashika's primary motivation for working was to save for current and future education expenses, and with housing and food provided by her family, she was able to prioritize school over work.

Some students were forced to reduce work hours or stop working altogether when the academic pressure was mounting. Support from their families allowed students to leave service-sector jobs for better opportunities. Danika, a conditionally supported student who lived with her parents in a home that they owned, left her job at Round Table Pizza so she could focus on her job with the Employment Development Department, a strategy that was available to her because most of her work earnings go to savings, not her current expenses.

> I started off in January still doing both jobs…weekends were crazy because I would work 10 to 6 and 10 to 7. My whole day is gone. That's when I do homework most. It was crazy for a while and at a point I was like, "I need to quit. I can't really do it anymore." And I realized I didn't need it. I don't need that job. I didn't need to be doing that. So it's been a big relief of stress and everything, quitting that.

Danika needed to work to pay her expenses, but her family support allowed her to leave her second job. Affluent students had an even greater buffer between work and school, and they could even afford to lose their job. Students like Eric represent a best-case scenario for balancing work and school made possible by his family's comprehensive financial support. Eric, who attended school full time and worked 15 hours a week, described how, if his boss was

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inconsiderate of his work schedule, he would simply quit his job: "So classes come first, then I work my work schedule around it….I already had a class schedule. They had to be lenient. And if they're not lenient for the next semester, then I just don't work there." For students who were conditionally or comprehensively supported (that is, not responsible for housing or food costs) their family resources opened up more options for combining their obligations, including reducing or leaving employment.

Outcomes of Working

Despite students' best efforts at flexing their schedules, most times students could not effectively prioritize their competing demands. Students were cognizant of the difficulty of work flexing, recognizing that meeting the demands and responsibilities of employment affected their overall energy levels and academic performance. Managing work and school schedules led to a range of negative outcomes according to students. Similar to Goldrick-Rab (2016:170), I find that working fatigued students and interfered with the time they could spend studying or sleeping. Students also reported that the difficulty combining work and school led them to fail classes or leave community college.

Students reported that managing academic responsibilities with work and family commitments led them to lose sleep. Ashika believed that she failed her pre-algebra class in the fall semester because she could not dedicate adequate time to the class after working a closing shift on the evening before her lecture. She recalled, "Sunday night, if I'm closing, I would get probably three or maybe four hours sleep and go to that class. It's hard to balance those two." In retrospect, Ashika could see that she was not able to devote adequate time to studying. Even

when using the strategy of structuring time, the exhaustion of work on Sunday night bled into her performance in class on Monday morning.

In addition to the hours spent on the job, the hours students spent preparing for work and organizing their schedules sapped their energy. Students like Harlan and Holly articulated how working "drains" and "wipes out" the attentiveness they had for college. As Harlan put it: "If I didn't have a job or anything that would drain me out, I feel like I'd be doing great." Holly, who worked full time and had four children in addition to taking a microbiology night class, described being wiped out from her work as a vocational nurse and found it "hard to retain information" in her night classes after work.

> A lot of my job is mental as well. It's not as much physical as it is mental. And so by the time I get to school, I'm wiped out. It's really hard to retain information….It does, it wipes you out physically and mentally and emotionally.

Holly's example reveals the complexities of struggling to manage employment as a student. By the time students met their work and family obligations, there was little energy left for school. Joyce drew a link between being tired from work and having difficulty concentrating in class.

> BH: Have work and school conflicted at all this semester?

> Joyce: Always, yeah. I mean if you work, you get tired. The more tired you are, the less ability you have to really concentrate on the schoolwork that you have to do. So, yeah, definitely. And any day that I don't work, I always of course have way more energy, and I always feel like I can do so much more.

Students had a limited amount of time and energy and intensive employment left them too tired to focus on school.

Students report that work directly affected their academic performance. Work uncertainty reverberated through students' school schedules, causing changes in the amount of time students had to study. When student work hours were unpredictable, students could not plan in advance to study, do homework, or meet up with classmates because they could not predict when they

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would be scheduled to work. Tara, who lived with her family and attended school part time,

discussed how earlier in the semester, a last-minute work shift at her food-service job conflicted

with the time she had set aside to prepare for an exam. Rather than preparing at home, Tara's

studying was sporadic and haphazard between serving clients: "A few days before [my shift], I

prepared everything I would need to study and then took it with me, and whenever I wasn't

dealing with someone, I was flipping through flash cards and looking at my study guide." Tara's

focus was split between work and her exam preparation, attenuating her ability to concentrate.

Arianna, a 21-year-old student who lived with her sister, struggled to fit in studying while

she worked as a caretaker for her four-month-old niece; after a long day of full-time work and a

night class, she was too tired to study. She reflected on what was difficult about school for in her

first semester:

> It probably wouldn't have been so hard if I hadn't worked. Cause my niece, she's
> kinda demanding. She likes to be carried and held, and if I were to put her down,
> she would get upset and it would distract me from doing my homework or
> studying…. It made it hard because I wasn't able to try to study. So my brother
> will get home around 4 o'clock and I can leave to go to school, and then I go to
> class and I come home at 9 o'clock every night and I'm tired. I try to study and do
> homework, but it will be a long day. So I probably don't get as much studying or
> homework done as I would like to get done.

Arianna was unable to study while she watched her niece or at night after returning from class.

Like many students, the sheer number of hours she worked as a caretaker left little energy for

attending school or studying.

Students drew a direct link between intensive employment and course failure. Daniella

summarized how several of the components of job quality—schedule unpredictability, lacking

autonomy and control over her schedule, the difficulty of switching between work and school,

and having an employer that did not value her academic goals—explained why, in the past, she

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failed classes. She recalled how in a past retail job, the scheduling demands, especially around

the holidays, left her with little time to study for classes, contributing to her course failure.

> If I was working at Macy's still, I don't think I would've did [sic] well…..So I
> know there was a semester when I was working…..And it was the holiday season,
> so they want you to work. And the holiday season coincides with finals. So, it was
> very, very hard. If I was working there, I probably would've failed again because
> it's so demanding. They don't care that you have school. They're like, "we need
> you to come in." And weekends, [I] didn't have weekends off like I do now…. So
> it was very hard to find time to study. It made sense why I didn't do well.

When the burden of simultaneous involvement in college and the labor market is too great,

student workers may earn poor grades, transfer to another college, or leave college altogether.

Amy, age 36, was unable to work or attend college full time because of chronic health issues.

Her job as a costumer at the theatre gave Amy the opportunity to work on a show-by-show basis,

which she was able to do financially because of her husband and father's financial support as

well as disability payments. But even with her work flexibility, Amy ultimately left Summit

View college, despite her attempt to better structure her time by taking classes online. Even with

that, she found it too difficult to fit in education with her work, family, and personal health

needs. In our early interviews, Amy thought she could switch from evening classes to the

flexible online format to accommodate her work:

> I know the dates for "Something Rotten," but I don't know necessarily the hours
> yet…And those are subject to change though because if they needed us to stay
> longer, or they needed us to come in early, then they can do that. …So, that's kind
> of the hard part with school. That's why next semester, I'm taking online classes.
> Because I'm planning to work a couple of shows and they're in the evening,
> they're during the day, so there's really no good time to pick a class and continue
> working.

But in later interviews, Amy revealed that she dropped her courses after realizing she did not

have time to read or participate in online discussions:

> Amy: I dropped out a couple of weeks after I started, so unfortunately, I didn't get
> too much into them. It was just too overwhelming right from the start.

BH: So tell me about that. When did you realize "this just might not work for me"?

Amy: It was within a couple weeks. I started missing right from the start—missing discussions, because they were both online classes. So it was just with work and everything else, I was missing too much of the online discussions. I was not getting all the reading done. I just didn't have the time.

Amy's example illustrates how easy it was to withdraw time and investment from education when pressing issues in the context of students' lives, like health, financial need, or family crises, took priority. It is because of the structure of the community college, namely, that Amy could withdraw from her courses without facing penalty from the institution, allowing her to drop out one semester while leaving open the possibility of returning in another semester.

Harlan, who was disconnected from his family, dropped his classes four weeks into the semester after increasing his work hours due to financial stress. Harlan owed over $1,000 in tickets for driving without his registration and had been paying to take Uber to work since his bike was broken and he could not afford the repairs. Meeting his basic needs, like food, rent, and transportation, took precedence over his school attendance:

I'm like, "okay, well I really need to get a second job." I'm going to start saving up money for material things, like I need new clothes. I need a new car. Because I was also really getting mad at the fact that I had to bike to school every day too.

Attending college was impossible for Harlan while managing the vicious cycle of poverty and economic insecurity. The real structural difficulty that he encountered as a poor student who was disconnected from his family constrained his choice to attend college. The financial barriers, of needing reliable transportation, clothes, and a backpack, that are necessary for meeting the demands of college were key to Harlan's decision to drop out.[11] In contrast, students who had

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[11] Harlan meets the income requirements for financial aid eligibility but is ineligible because he has failed classes in past semesters.

family and financial support did not feel the academic strain of working. Eve was comprehensively supported by her parents and worked 20 to 25 hours a week at a family-owned Filipino restaurant. She felt she could manage the demands of work and school. She recalled how she maintained her academic performance when she started working: "It worked out pretty good because my grades didn't go down. My grades still stayed the same. I just had to work a little harder….So I was like 'I can manage this. I can actually have time for myself as well as school.'"

Students who worked minimally did not engage in work flexing and they did not feel their academic performance suffered due to work. Sully, aged 35, was financially supported by his girlfriend and worked sporadically helping out his stepdad's landscaping company. He acknowledged that not having to work helped him get through a math class he was struggling in. Sully said:

> Not having to worry about other things in life actually was a little bit of help. I think if I was working or there was other outside factors, it might have made it a little bit harder. But knowing that I had the slack to be able to take care of just that [math class] and not really worry about other major responsibilities was a real big help.

With his girlfriend's support, Sully was shielded from worrying about "outside factors" and could put all of his attention towards passing his algebra class. Employment—whether time at work, managing multiple jobs, or recovering physically or emotionally from a workshift—was an "outside factor" that students affected their course performance.

Discussion

Work is a central part of the college experience for community college students, yet the qualitative nature of students' jobs and their processes for managing the simultaneous

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responsibilities of employment and academics are not well understood. In this chapter, I sought to understand students' strategies for combining paid work with college.

I began by considering variation in the types of jobs students hold. Many community college students—80 percent in my sample—worked in retail or service jobs. Reflecting what is widely understood in scholarship on the sociology of work and employment, I found that retail and service-sector jobs are physically and emotionally demanding and offer little worker autonomy or control. Community college students are concentrated in these bad and precarious jobs, employment that is characterized by low and stagnant wages, limited worker control, no accommodation in dealing with non-work issues, and employee flexibility at the demand of employers (Kalleberg 2011). Uncertainty about the amount and timing of work hours is common in retail and service jobs, leaving workers vulnerable with respect to their ability to predict their hours of work and income stream (Greenhouse 2014; Halpin 2015; Schneider and Harknett 2019). As I described, scheduling unpredictability was particularly harmful for student workers, who were in limbo with respect to their ability to predict when to prepare for class, complete assignments, or attend to their family obligations outlined in the previous chapter. Relatedly, many frontline retail and service jobs require students to manage their emotions when they interact with customers (Hochschild 1983; Bolton and Boyd 2003). The manual and emotional labor required in these occupations wears down students' bodies, leading to exhaustion and difficulty focusing on school (Wood et al. 2016).

There are exceptions. On-campus employers and managers in state internships were reliably more adaptable to students' changing needs and course schedules and offered the possibility of long-term employment. The findings presented here support earlier studies that on-campus employers may be more sensitive to students' academic schedules and goals, and

because they limit the number of hours students can work, students are not scheduled to work extensively (Broton et al. 2016). On-campus jobs and student internships exemplify the educational benefits that can result from employment, yet the majority of my interviewees did not hold these comparatively advantaged jobs; rather, they were exposed to the unpredictability and instability of work in retail and services.

In addition to confirming past research about schedule unpredictability and emotional labor, these findings add to our understanding of job quality by defining several key dimensions of quality that are specific to the experiences of student employees, namely the ease of students' transition between work and school, whether their job provides a meaningful labor market experience, and the extent of their employer's understanding of their academic goals. The characteristics of the jobs that students held complicated their ability to manage school and employment.

I uncovered that holding a job required students to engage in *work flexing*, an employment management strategy by which students manipulated their schedules to accommodate work and school. Work flexing encompasses the often invisibilized labor and time that enabled students to continue employment while simultaneously pursuing their postsecondary goals. In being a student worker, all students engaged in a continuous process of reflection, calculation, and planning—an additional form of labor that took place outside of their scheduled work hours. Rather than "balancing," a word that students often use to describe the relationship between college and their other obligations, work flexing is a process of "managing" a set of circumstances that push and pull at each other. Students are often not able to "balance" or "harmonize" these areas of their lives, but instead work to handle, coordinate, and arrange competing work demands with school and family.

One strategy for work flexing utilized by all students was to structure work and school time. Students constrained their schedules by limiting school to certain days of the week or certain hours with each day, though the repercussions of volatile work schedules and changes each semester meant that this process was not straightforward. As a result, students' work and school schedules were not concurrent and separate, but completely wrapped up in each other. Students were constantly monitoring, adjusting, and rearranging their schedules in an attempt to balance work and school.

Scheduling work hours in relation to the schedule of classes (and vice versa) was common among all students, but whether work or classes took priority was socially patterned based on students' family resources. The context of students' family webs shaped the kind of strategies students used to manage employment. A major finding from the previous chapter is that students vary in the extent of financial support they receive from their families, and the extent to which they are expected to meet their own economic needs. Some students did not depend on their jobs for economic survival and could reduce their hours or leave work, while others adapted by minimizing academic responsibilities. Students from conditionally supported families, who often had significant financial responsibilities but did not pay for rent or groceries, could reduce work for school, leaving less desirable jobs or cutting back on hours. Students from comprehensively supported families could reduce work to an even greater extent, quitting a job altogether if the effort of managing school and employment became too great. In contrast, interdependent students could not afford to reduce their working hours and more often drew on the strategy of reducing school for work: failing or withdrawing from classes, dropping down from full-time to part-time status, or trying online courses. Students' material needs and conditions clearly informed their time-structuring decisions, and those who described the

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multiple demands of college, work, and family as "manageable" were those with greater income and resources (Ziskin et al. 2010). These stories reveal the time-management challenges of students and the resulting trade-offs between work and school responsibilities that are required to meet multiple demands at the same time.

Students believed their employment had consequences for their academic performance in college. The portraits presented here show how poor job quality, and the additional labor of work flexing, made it challenging for students to consistently meet their academic demands. I did find support for the notion that students have a limited amount of time, attention, and energy, and that work commitments compete for students' time. Students reported that exhaustion from work (in particular for those who work long hours in physical or interactive service jobs) negatively affected their achievement. These findings support earlier studies that illustrate how trying to meet demands of college, work, and other roles simultaneously can cause stress and other challenges (Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2010; Levin et al. 2010). Meeting these demands is a delicate balance where one unexpected change (e.g., a sick child) could cause a cascade of problems in other areas of responsibility, including the ability to fulfill course requirements (Perna 2010; Hart 2019).

Employment pressures led students to arrange their class schedules around their work schedules, take lighter course loads, fail classes when they lack adequate time to study, and take semesters away from school to focus on employment. These adjustments may cause them to take longer than normal to graduate, a finding that raises some concern as full-time, sustained enrollment has been linked to positive academic outcomes (Attewell, Heil, and Reisel 2012). In fact, I find that students dropped out of college when they could not bring together their work and school schedules. Past qualitative studies of students and work consider only the

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perspectives and experiences of students who are currently enrolled and therefore "successful" at least to some extent at simultaneously managing the demands of work, school, and other responsibilities. Because of the unique longitudinal design of this project, this study also includes the voices and experiences of students who left higher education because they were unable to manage these multiple responsibilities. In the case of Amy, she attempted to use the work flexing strategy of taking classes online but was ultimately unsuccessful; when I met with her the following semester, she had withdrawn from her classes. Through longitudinal interviews, I provide a glimpse into the outcomes of these competing obligations over the long run. While dropping out of college may be the most extreme outcome, even students who managed to sustain enrollment were strained by the ongoing process of work flexing.

Chapter 4: Institutional Burdens: How Students Navigate Community College Structures and Policies

Institutional perspectives focus on community colleges' role in shaping student outcomes through their structures and policies. Researchers adopting the institutional perspective have acknowledged that community colleges are complex organizations where students face a variety of program and credential options and confusing class schedules and course catalogs. Early research argued that students lack the procedural knowledge or know-how to navigate college (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2003), while recent research centers on how college procedures contribute to students' difficulty completing college (Bailey et al. 2015; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2009; Scott Clayton 2015). Despite many community colleges, including Summit View, adopting institutional reforms designed to streamline students' educational pathways, many students continue to face difficulty navigating college structures. What obstacles arise in students' interactions with the institution of the community college? How do students comprehend college policies and gather knowledge to make major and coursework decisions? And how do students' experiences navigating college structures intersect with their work and family commitments?

In this chapter, I find that students encounter two kinds of barriers in their interactions with Summit View College. First, they experience a lack of guidance in making credential, major, and coursework decisions and in navigating college policies. When students steer their own route through the educational process, it burdens students with an additional layer of responsibility—gathering information and comparing and contrasting sources—beyond focusing on coursework and academic performance. Second, students face the obstacle of institutional instability at the community college due to the limited availability of courses, last minute

changes of the course schedule, and evolving program requirements and policies. The hurdles students face are compounded by competing financial and family obligations. This chapter contribute to the rich literature on the role of institutional structures in college persistence, showing the kinds of information that present obstacles for students without comprehensive guidance and how patterned features of the community college reverberate back on familial and employment experiences.

Institutional Perspectives on College Completion

Institutional perspectives focus on how the design of community colleges affects student outcomes (Bailey et al. 2015; Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2003; Person et al. 2006). To achieve their goal of serving a diverse array of students, community colleges offer a variety of programs and courses (Bailey et al. 2015). As a result, they present students with overwhelming choices about what program to pursue, which courses to take within it, and how to get help from different college offices. In the traditional community college structure, students are expected to explore these options and make informed decisions on their own with minimal guidance. Community colleges have been criticized for a lack of support services, murky curricular structure, and unclear guidance for students in dealing with bureaucratic hurdles. Structural theorists argue that this confusing structure and lack of guidance reduces the likelihood of student success.

From early research, we learned that institutional procedures impose obstacles to students' progress. Embedded in community colleges, there is a hidden curriculum of social prerequisites: taken for granted, procedural knowledge required to effectively navigate the institution (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2003). Navigating this hidden curriculum requires social

know-how, a particular set of skills and knowledge about school procedures that is more available to middle-class students than to lower-income students. At least in part, past research attributed students' low success rates to their deficits: their lack of awareness of enrollment, registration, and financial aid procedures (Person et al. 2006). While past research acknowledged the absence of explicit organizational structures and policies to support students through bureaucratic hurdles, they also blame students for not initiating guidance and for "poor handling" of conflicting demands, such as those outlined in previous chapters like ill parents, childcare, and work obligations (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2003:133). This framing reinforces the idea that is it students themselves, rather than institutional structures, who are responsible for low success rates (Karp, Hughes, and O'Gara 2008).

More recent research has turned the focus away from student deficiencies to institutional deficiencies in the design and structure of colleges themselves. It is not that students lack knowledge to make informed decisions, but that the community college context promotes indecision and confusion through the "choice architecture," the structure and presentation of choices about majors and course pathways (Scott-Clayton 2015). As they enter community colleges, students are confronted with a series of complicated decisions that they must make with little assistance which overwhelms students and results in ineffective program and course selection decisions (Bailey et al. 2015). To reduce the burden of numerous active decisions, researchers in the structuralist perspective highlight how community colleges can improve student support and advising by implementing "guided pathways" (Bailey et al. 2015). This series of structural changes to policies and programming includes using clearly structured, coherent pathways that direct students by tracking distinct learning outcomes, streamlining course sequences, and building support from academic advisors and departments.

An alternative approach to understanding the institutional structure considers how community college programs and policies create different types of burdens for students. Theorizing about social policies more broadly, Herd and Moynihan (2018) argue that administrative burdens are created in any interaction between individuals and public institutions. The structure of public services shapes the extent to which that burden is shouldered by individuals or the institution. One such burden is *learning costs,* the cost of time and effort expended to learn about a program or service (Herd and Moynihan 2018). In students' interactions with the community college, many researchers have argued that the burdens are unevenly borne by students. The structure of college services requires that students gather information and apply it to make decisions that advance their educational goals, with little intervention from the college. Students incur learning costs when they engage in search processes and collect information about whether there are services that can fulfill unmet needs (such as accessing the transfer center, counseling, or financial aid), determine how to use those services, and complete the requirements for application processes.

Extending this framework to the community college context, I consider the costs students come up against in interacting with the college. In their traditional design, community colleges place the onus on students to develop educational goals, learn about college policies, and make effective choices. Many community college students feel that they do not receive enough information about program requirements and options and struggle to find the information they need to establish a plan (Rosenbaum et al. 2009; WestEd 2012). For example, in the case of the transfer process, community college students are burdened by the need to invest time and energy to gather information about transfer pathways and policies (Schudde, Jabbar, and Hartman 2021). When colleges neglect to provide adequate or consistent information about transfer

options and requirements, students must seek it out through their own means, and their strategies for doing so are often ineffective. Even the most successful students— who curate resources from family, friends, and various websites, determine credibility, and synthesize information to inform their transfer decisions—often gather incorrect information that leads them astray in their educational plans. Colleges require great effort on the part of the students to be assertive in collecting and comparing information and consistently leveraging it to further their educational goals.

Building on the organizational perspective in prior work, I ask: what are students' experiences with institutional policies and procedures, and how do their experiences interact with their lives beyond college? First, I profile three students, showing how differently positioned students come in contact with administrative barriers and how they navigate the postsecondary landscape throughout their college careers. By examining whether and how students draw on institutional support over time, I show how gaps in students' knowledge and a perceived lack of active support from the college administration shapes their educational goals and trajectories. Then I examine themes from these profiles in greater depth using textual evidence from all interviewees. I find that students face two interrelated burdens in interfacing with the community college institution: the burden of information gathering and the burden of adjusting to institutional instability. Students perceive an absence of help from counselors, which leads them to navigate program and policy decisions on their own. In this way, community colleges are institutions with high *learning costs,* placing the onus on students to create and maintain their own pathways through college (Herd and Moynihan 2018). Community college are also unstable organizations, and *institutional precarity*, characterized by cancelled or unavailable classes, complicates students' already unstable lives.

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Narrative Portraits of Navigating Organizational Structures and Policies

Harmony

Harmony graduated in 2017 from an alternative charter high school where she was a dual-enrollment student at Summit View College in her junior and senior year. She applied and was accepted to the local state college but decided not to attend because she had not selected a major or career path. Instead, Harmony transitioned smoothly into the community college with four college classes under her belt,

When I met Harmony in 2017, she was excelling in her first semester as a full-time student at Summit View, earning all As. Harmony was enrolled in a program for low-income students, Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS), and received book vouchers and priority registration. As an EOPS student, she was also required to meet with a counselor three times each semester. Harmony was no stranger to relying on the college administration for help; she and her family attended federal student aid workshops at Summit View to ensure that they correctly completed their financial aid forms. Even though she was still unsure about her plans, Harmony declared a liberal arts major so she could be eligible for financial aid and started a work-study job at the financial aid office. At the time of our first interview, Harmony hoped to transfer to the local state college in the spring of 2020 to finish up her bachelor's degree.

Over the two years that I followed her progress, Harmony continued successfully through her classes and in her third semester, enrolled part time, taking 11 units. Harmony did not realize that her part-time status would affect her EOPS eligibility, but "didn't mind" that she was not receiving the full financial aid award or book voucher. Harmony's counselor encouraged her to choose a major as she neared the completion of her general education classes, leading Harmony to declare a major in psychology.

In our last interview, Harmony was enrolled part time to make sure that she performed well in her major classes. Her completion plan was delayed by one year because of her choice to take classes part time. (To complete an associate degree in two years, students need to take 15 units a semester; Harmony takes around 12 units.) However, if she was to continue on her current trajectory, Harmony would be able to successfully leave Summit View in 2021, completing her degree and transfer requirements in three years.

Harmony's narrative shows how organizational policies can be a crucial source of financial and practical support for students. The organizational components at the college—the EOPS program and the requirement that students meet with a counselor to maintain the program benefits—seem to help Harmony stay on track, although she still encountered some informational barriers about requirements. Left to gather information about college policies on her own, Harmony often did not become aware of potential roadblocks, like receiving less financial aid or prolonging her time at community college, until it was too late to adjust. Even still, Harmony was a student with one of the strongest institutional connections, consistently relying on college resources, meeting with a counselor, applying for and receiving financial aid, and working in the financial aid office.

Eric

When he graduated from high school in 2013, Eric did not apply to four-year colleges. He thought, "I'm just gonna have an easy senior year and then start over." Eric did not think his GPA would have qualified him for the local state university, so he immediately enrolled at Summit View and has attempted 15 units every semester since he started four years ago, accruing 120 units—double the amount necessary to transfer—but no credential.

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The primary obstacle to Eric's college success is the absence of a clear academic plan. The college has not provided him with information about choosing a major or career planning, and left on his own to initiate counseling visits, Eric rarely visits the counselor. After an initial visit with a counselor which was "a waste of time" since the counselor recommended courses for which he had not completed the prerequisites, he spent several years "just taking classes" with "no guidance from anybody." Eric has been left on his own with course taking, which has led to hurdles and missteps, such as his not realizing the difference between general education and major coursework. He also has switched his major several times, initially pursuing kinesiology so he could have the same major as his friend. Eric later switched his major to biology, and when I first met him, he had plans to earn an AS degree and apply to University of California and California State University schools and become a field biologist.

At the time of the third interview, Eric had a D in precalculus and chemistry. Since chemistry is a requirement for research intensive universities, he decided to drop the class, winnowing the choice set of colleges to which he can ultimately transfer. Eric also failed Precalculus because he was not completing the homework and regularly missed or showed up late to class. Despite several semesters of difficulty in courses, Eric did not report having been contacted by the college administration about his performance. At our last interview, Eric had one semester left to finish his requirements and transfer to a state university, if he could pass his classes. He no longer cared if he earned an associate degree.

From Eric's account we see how limited guidance from the college hinders a student's progress. Eric accumulated credits but did not do so logically or in a way that led to a degree. Eric did not enter college with a clear picture of his academic goals, which made it harder for him to seek reliable advice. During our time together, Eric did not see the value in working with

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a counselor, which led to costly mistakes, such as taking unnecessary classes. With limited knowledge of how to choose courses, he depended on considerations that were unrelated to the merits of programs or careers, like the major his friend was pursuing. In STEM majors, where the sequence of courses depends on course success in the prior semester, his repeated course failure also delayed his progress. Despite these setbacks, Eric stayed enrolled in college, although his continued enrollment had not yet led to a credential.

Jessi

Jessi dropped out of high school in 2003 and, over the next decade, worked in insurance call centers first in customer service and later as a supervisor. Jessi felt compelled to return to school when she became aware that she would not be eligible for promotions at her education level: "your opportunities cease when you don't have the education level they're looking for."

Starting in 2006, Jessi enrolled at another college in Summit View's district and started taking courses in the evenings after work in music theory, eventually earning a certificate. Then, in 2013, Jessi became a full-time student taking prerequisites for nursing, a career that she believed would allow her to live securely regardless of her music endeavors. The program requirements were demanding and challenging for her, and Jessi worked her way up through remedial math classes, sometimes retaking classes several times before passing them. When I met Jessi, she had completed all but a few of the prerequisites to enter a nursing program and pursue her goal of becoming a nurse practitioner.

The first semester when we met, Jessi was enrolled in microbiology at Summit View. She was struggling to enroll full time, even though she desired to complete her degree because of the limited availability of classes: "the lack of classes, lack of availability is totally—it's terrible, it's

ridiculous." Even when classes were available, Jessi restricted the number of units she took because she did not want to get "too overwhelmed" and risk having to retake courses in another semester.

At our last meeting, Jessi was not enrolled in college; she had only three classes remaining on her academic plan and could not enroll in any of them because they were full. When we concluded, Jessi planned to work with a counselor to see if she could regain her eligibility for priority registration and was considering taking a class at a college in another district if she was unable to enroll at Summit View.

Jessi returned to college to improve her career prospects, but she encountered institutional restrictions on her progress. First, her progress was delayed by remedial coursework, a phenomenon that has been studied extensively (Bettinger and Long 2005, 2009; Jaggars and Stacey 2014; Martorell and McFarlin 2011). Since Jessi completed her coursework, Summit View has eliminated math and English placement tests and shifted to using high school coursework and grades to assess students' preparation for college-level work, a shift that has reduced the number of students in remedial courses. Second, Jessi's progress was delayed by her experience of overenrolled classes, which restricted her ability to enroll full time.

Institutional Burdens

Three key findings emerged in how students made sense of and responded to the college institutional structures and policies. First, most students avoided seeking counselors' advice or only did so minimally—to confirm information they had already sought on their own—because they perceived counselors to be unhelpful or give inconsistent or incorrect advice. Second, with this orientation to counseling, most students made program and policy decisions on their own,

leading to high learning costs (Herd and Moynihan 2018) for students, as they spent time gathering and adjudicating information. Finally, the college itself is an unstable institution, and precarity at the community college was another hurdle that students had to manage and attempt to overcome to meet their academic goals.

Perception of Unreliable Counseling

With overwhelming choices and confusing policies, we might predict that students frequently and consistently rely on the advice of community college counselors. However, students in this study rarely sought counseling because they perceived counselors to be unreliable, both in terms of availability and the advice they provided. Community college counselors are tasked with overwhelming caseloads (Bettinger et al. t, 2013). With so few counselors, it is no wonder that students reported receiving inaccurate or incomplete information from advising staff who are tasked with understanding hundreds of programs and degree pathways. It is important to note that these are students' perspectives on counselors and reflect students' perceptions of support or a lack of support.

In the current organization of community colleges, counseling appointments are initiated by students, placing the burden on students to find the counseling office, make appointments, and ask appropriate questions. As Oliver noted, "I don't know when counselors have ever reached out to students saying, 'Hey, I want to set up an appointment with you. I want to talk about this, this, and this.' I don't really see that happening often." Because the onus was on students to make an appointment or wait during drop-in hours, the default was for students to not receive counseling.

Most students believed the counselors provided inconsistent or incorrect information. Some students developed this perspective based on their direct experience, while others heard stories from friends who were misled by a counselor. Mahlia visited the counseling office inconsistently, and while she acknowledged their advice prevented her from taking unnecessary courses, she remained skeptical about the veracity of their advice. She explained, "They seem really unhelpful, cause I keep hearing horror stories from my friends that they've gotten screwed over or now they're stuck doing this [class] when they didn't even need it. So I'm watching my own back first, then having to deal with them." Mahlia felt responsible for "watching her own back first": finding information, developing an academic plan, and choosing courses on her own before visiting the counselor. Students believed their role was to continuously gather and fact-check information to improve their chances of successfully meeting their educational goals, while the counselor's role was to confirm that information. Like Mahlia, most students used handouts, online forms, or the transfer website to choose classes. As Amy summarized, "I just have the little hand out that says the classes you need for this degree and I follow that." When students perceive counselors to be unavailable or offer inconsistent advice, they develop their own systems for managing what classes to take.

However, students often made errors in their planning without help from counselors. Tommy had recently graduated from high school when I met him in 2017 and after two years, he believed that he was on track to transfer next year, despite having failed English three times. The way he approached his academic planning was typical for students in this study. He did not meet with his counselor regularly and when I asked what kept him from visiting the counseling office, he confided: "honestly, because they aren't helpful. Mostly they're there to verify information and to officially make markings in order to enter into the system that I need to do these things."

Instead, Tommy used an education plan from a previous semester as a general guideline, but often deviated from it when he failed or withdrew from classes (which required he repeat them in another semester) or chose general education classes based on his interests.

> I'm not throwing any shade to the counselors. I'm now more decided on picking them [courses] out myself using the State [College] GE requirement paper that I printed out myself. And looking at it and seeing what classes fit in these areas, and that I would actually prefer doing….Classes that I find would increase my general knowledge…I'll see if the class sounds fun. What I am interested in. Because I won't seek out a math class. I will do it because it's part of my Ges. But I will seek out classes like psychology because I'm really interested in learning about how people work.

Tommy did not regularly visit the counselors because he believed he could choose his own courses and manage the completion of his requirements for general education, an AA degree in American Sign Language, and nursing prerequisites for transfer. Understandably, it is difficult to identify all the required courses and schedule them in the correct order, and in our last interview Tommy revealed that he was "a little annoyed," that he had completed most of his general education but had not made progress on his nursing courses: "I did take almost all my GE classes so far…I just wished I was at a steady pace of doing both GE's and my degree classes." When students felt that counselors' advice was inadequate, they turned to less reliable sources, usually their own systems, which resulted in taking unnecessary courses and drawing out their time to degree.

High Learning Costs

In the current community college design, students bear high learning costs (Herd and Moynihan 2018) because they are responsible for seeking information about programs and policies. I find that in the absence of guidance initiated by the college, students primarily learned about policies through trial and error. This was ineffective, causing students to act on misinformation or fail to

realize that they were missing information until it was too late, prolonging their time in college, wasting time and money, and delaying the completion of required courses.

Navigating College Programs

Knowledge about college programs and coursework represented a significant obstacle for many students in this study. Students were left to navigate choices independently related to majors, courses, and decisions about their academic plans. Information (or lack thereof) about different fields of study was one form of knowledge that stalled students' progress. Like Eric's narrative elucidates, many students were delayed because they swirled between different majors, unable to settle on a field of study. Without assistance from the college in choosing a major or creating a designated course plan, most students adopted a trial-and-error approach, taking classes and exploring their preferences haphazardly.

At the time of our first interview, Mahlia had been enrolled in college for two years and had not declared a major, which was an obstacle to her consistent academic progress. Mahlia experimented with different fields of study and was drawn to music and art classes. She often took classes "for fun," that were not a part of any degree path. Instead of guidance from a college administrator, Mahlia "just guided myself of what I wanted to take, like experimentation. Try to figure out a major." This lack of direction led to mixed academic outcomes for Mahlia. While she was on track to finish her AA in liberal arts, she still did not have a clear sense of a major and had plans to enroll at a private, for-profit college to train for a career in digital audio production.

Alexa had been in college for four years, including some semesters when she was not enrolled due to health issues, and was still unsure about what she wanted to pursue. She started

taking allied health courses but struggled with memorization in the medical terminology class.

She took sociology courses but could not see how the classes would lead to a career. Then she

started taking business classes to pursue an accounting degree, but that required math courses,

which she does not want to take. She described her process of taking coursework across multiple

fields:

> Both my parents are in the medical industry. So they're like, "Do medical.
> There's always jobs in medical." Yeah, let's do that. Started taking it. I'm not a
> memorization person. Learned that the hard way. Medical terminology was so
> tough…then I started taking Professor Charles in sociology to fill a unit. And I
> was like, "wow, this is actually really interesting." [But] I don't want to do social
> work. So what else have I taken? I've taken business classes…At my job
> currently I do bookkeeping and accounting…And I've taken an interest in that.
> But I hate math with a fiery passion. And in order to get your accounting degree,
> you have to take those math courses…So yeah, I'm a butterfly of different aspects
> here.

Alexa's haphazard major choice process meant that she had not taken classes towards any

specific degree program. Alexa could have benefitted from outreach from the college about how

majors connect to careers, as well as how to sequence courses into programs. Without

information from the counseling office about how classes fit into her program requirements,

Alexa accrued unnecessary courses assuming that coursework in her major fulfilled her degree

requirements, taking "30 sociology classes I did not need; I only needed two." In Fall 2018,

Alexa earned her AA degree in liberal arts, but with no clear interest in a field of study, did not

plan to transfer to four-year college, an outcome that had been her goal when we first met.

Students lacked guidance and strategies for determining what to study in college. For

Harlan, work was necessary to make ends meet after graduating from high school, and he did not

immediately enroll in college. He attempted college one semester the following year but failed

and withdrew from the two courses he was taking after he was kicked out of his parents' house

midsemester. Fall 2017 was Harlan's first semester back in college, and in our first interview,

Harlan felt there was "a 50/50 chance" that he would return to school next semester. When I

asked what would need to happen for him to stay in school, he said:

> If I find out what I want to do, mostly that. If I really had an idea of what I wanted to do
> or I knew what I want to do….I have so much uncertainty. I don't know what I'm
> doing…I really have a lot of interest in…psychology, history, sociology. I like agriculture
> a lot for some odd reason. And biology too…I feel like audio engineering, it's not
> something that I can rely on for a source of income. Maybe it could be a secondary
> source of income, but nothing really primary.

Harlan was torn between many different degree fields across the physical and social sciences and

humanities and was unsure how to adjudicate between them. While he was drawn to music,

Harlan was worried that audio engineering would not provide a stable career. Without

information or guidance about majors or careers, Harlan was nervous about whether he should

even be enrolled in college without knowing what degree to work towards. He ultimately

withdrew from his classes in the spring semester and though he reenrolled, was failing his classes

at the time of our last interview. Limited guidance for choosing majors delayed students and

even led some to drop out in frustration.

Navigating College Policies

Another learning cost borne by students was gathering knowledge about college policies.

Students were not made aware of policies at the college in a systematic way. For example, the

college has a policy about registration priority which gives preferential timing in course

enrollment to students who meet particular criteria. In California, State Bill 1456 legislates that

students who demonstrate substantial progress towards a degree or maintain membership in a

specified group (such as Harmony's participation in EOPS as a low-income student) have a

temporal advantage in course registration appointments. Conversely, students who have high unit

counts, but have not yet earned a degree, are placed at the end of the line. California has focused

on altering registration priorities (Bahr et al. 2015; Gurantz 2015) as one potential solution to course impaction (a phenomenon I describe later in the chapter), but this policy was not common knowledge at Summit View.

Eric and Jessi (profiled earlier) were surprised to learn that years of taking courses had affected their continued enrollment and financial aid eligibility. After realizing he could not enroll in classes during the typical appointment period, Eric visited a counselor: "I lost my priority registration because I have so many units. I was talking to [the counselor] about getting back on the list. But she said I couldn't do it. Then, 30 minutes later into the conversation when I mentioned I was a science major, she said I could do it." Eric was able to continue taking classes because he was enrolled in a high-unit major program (biology), but he did not learn of this policy until he had already lost the ability to register for classes early and therefore could not enroll in the courses he needed for his degree.

Jessi only learned that petitioning for a credential (her music theory certificate from her first college enrollment spell) would affect her ability to enroll in classes when she lost her enrollment priority, meaning that she was not eligible to enroll in classes until a later date, by which time many courses were already full.

> Had I known that me getting that certificate was going to cause all this windfall of a problem, I never would have done that. Had a counselor said, "Hey, by the way, before you petition for this, let me tell you what it's going to do to your enrollment and what this is going to mean for your financial aid. Are you still interested in continuing on in school? Let me explain to you how this works." There was nobody to kind of go over those steps. Now, sure enough, I didn't go out of my way to talk to a counselor before I did that. I didn't think anything of it. I didn't think any big deal of it…I can't say I'd be in a program, but there's a much better chance that I would be.

Rather than the college directly providing information about the effects of accruing many units, Jessi was burdened with seeking out that information on her own, and only did so when she had

already lost her priority registration. This revelation triggered another set of bureaucratic steps, prompting Jessi to appeal for priority registration and continued financial aid. Students like Jessi and Eric needed help and advice to respond to college policies in ways that did not disrupt their educational pathway.

Community colleges have confusing rules about courses that made it difficult for students to act as informed consumers. For example, some college courses may count towards general education requirements but not program-specific requirements; or courses that count toward requirements for a two-year degree may not be transferable units at a four-year institution (Scott-Clayton 2015). Some courses also do not count for college credit at all. College requires that students understand the difference between for-credit and remedial classes, and this is another college policy that has high learning costs for students. Students were surprised to find that enrolling in college does not necessarily imply that their courses count towards a credential or are transferable.

Understanding how to progress through remedial course sequences and which courses are required was confusing to students like Ashika, who had been enrolled full time at Summit View College for four years. One primary reason she had not completed a degree or transferred in that time is that she had been working her way through a remedial math sequence and failed math classes multiple times. Between her high school math courses, the placement test, her counselor, and someone she spoke with in the math department, Ashika was confused about whether (and which) remedial classes were even required for her degree. This confusion led to unnecessary course taking. Ashika enrolled in Pre-Algebra Mathematics (which she failed twice), Elementary Algebra (which she failed once), and Intermediate Algebra, which she believed was the correct course and met the AA/AS graduation requirements. Ashika described how she attempted Pre-

Algebra Mathematics (Math 30) three times before realizing that she did not need to take the class.

> I passed every class except for that math class, Math 30. But then I learned that I didn't need to take Math 30….Basically when I went to high school, as long as you passed geometry and above, those transfer units count towards Summit View. So I didn't need to start at Math 30. It was a waste of time….When I was in high school, no counselor told me that. I just took the assessment test and I was like, "okay, I'll just work my way bottom to top and just relearn math again." But I didn't know that I didn't need to take it.

Students incur learning costs when they need to seek out and piece together information across multiple sources, and in Ashika's case, she was unable to generate and act on accurate information about which math course was required for her program. The correct math course sequence varies for students depending on their major, and when students were not provided personalized information about their requirements, they understandably ended up confused by which courses were required based on their background (including high school math, AP tests, and placement test scores). In addition, in 2019, California implemented Assembly Bill 705, which stipulates that students should not be placed into remedial courses that may delay or deter their educational progress. Perhaps some of Ashika's confusion was linked to the college's implementation of this new policy.

Students ultimately learned about college policies, but did so in real time, making costly mistakes like taking unnecessary courses. In the case of Eduardo, learning about financial aid eligibility policies in real time led to a financial cost of not being awarded aid for several semesters. Eduardo had been in college for four years and wished to pursue a degree in biology and work in a medical laboratory but had difficulty actualizing his plan. Long work hours and the financial stress of supporting himself left little time for him to take demanding courses for his major. He typically enrolled part time, regularly failed and withdrew from classes when his other

obligations became too demanding, and usually only had the mental energy to take general education or fun classes, rather than math or chemistry. Eduardo did not realize that unsatisfactory academic progress threatened his financial aid eligibility.

> I haven't been getting financial aid because of my track record with my classes. So I brought my GPA back up, but I'm still underneath based on the number of W's on my transcript. I have more dropped classes than they want me to have before they'll start giving me financial aid again…That was also one of the other reasons that I stopped taking so many classes at the beginning of the semester was to try to only do the classes that I know I can finish. So I can try to bring myself back up past that probation point and see if I can start earning financial aid again.

Eduardo's strategy for managing his other obligations was to enroll in many classes, and then withdraw from the ones he felt he could not pass. Had he been informed about the financial and academic consequences of sustained withdrawals, Eduardo could have saved time and continued to receive financial support. When I asked Eduardo how he learned about this policy, he replied "it was just experience. It was 'I know I messed up on this semester.'" Rather than learning these policies through a formal channel at the college, students learned these policies through their own costly mistakes.

Courses and program requirements are particularly difficult to navigate in the community college context. Catalogs and websites describe isolated degree programs without an explanation of how students can proceed through a program from semester to semester, or how students can combine different programs or credential objectives (Rosenbaum et al. 2017). They do not describe how different kinds of courses (major and general education) link together, how courses can be used to fill multiple requirements, or how to lay out an academic plan that meets students' needs.

Alexa, the student who described herself as a "butterfly" of different majors, described how she had incomplete support for understanding how classes combine to fulfill various

objectives like degree and transfer requirements, which she only became aware of in her last

semester of college when she talked to the counselor about leaving Summit View.

> Alexa: I have one more whole semester to do classes in order to actually transfer out. Because I was doing classes that were for getting a degree. And so I didn't know the difference of classes that you needed to take in order to transfer.

> BH: Say more about that. When did you find out about that, those differences?

> Alexa: This counselor appointment before summer. So when I was like, "Oh, what do I have to do next?" They were like, "Oh, you have a lot." I was like, "What? I thought I was—No, what?" And then they were like, "Oh, no, that's just for your degree, not to transfer." And I was like, "It's not the same thing? I thought once you get your degree, you transfer?" They're like, "No, there's different requirements."…They don't really tell you that. And I feel like at orientation, they need to be like, "What do you want to do? We need to do this X, Y and Z." Because otherwise you'll be like me, taking classes all over, for no reason.

Alexa was shocked to learn "it's not the same thing" to complete degree and transfer

requirements, assuming that once you earned a degree, you were prepared to transfer as well. In

her final meeting with a counselor to confirm her readiness for graduation, Alexa learned that

while she had fulfilled the degree requirements, she had not fulfilled the requirements to transfer

to a state university. Rather than stay in college to complete the necessary courses, Alexa opted

to leave Summit View without fulfilling the transfer requirements. Her experience of a lack of

clear guidance about these requirements affected her course taking (she likely enrolled in

unnecessary classes because she did not have a strategic academic plan) and her ultimate college

outcome. Administrative hurdles led to disappointment and frustration for students, and my

findings suggest they may also lead students to change their academic goals or dropout.

Sadly, students often only became aware of the extent of incomplete institutional support

when they reached the end of completing their requirements and were preparing to graduate or

transfer. Students like Dave struggled to find adequate and consistent information about grades

and grade point average calculations in the transfer process. Dave enrolled at another community college immediately after high school to pursue a certificate in electron microscopy, and fifteen years later, returned to community college to complete his transfer requirements and pursue a bachelor's degree in viticulture. During the transfer process, Dave was dismayed when he learned that all of his college classes—even the ones from his first college spell in his early 20s—were included as part of his transfer application and GPA calculation.

> What I really don't understand is, a lot of the classes that I got poor grades in, like Ds in, were in the electron microscopy program that was totally unrelated to any general education or major. It was like a trade certification. So that's what I emailed [the counselor]…like, "is this what's being calculated?" I'm not entirely sure where the GPA is getting calculated from…. A lot of the classes that I got bad grades are in a totally unrelated trade certification program. I didn't think they'd be something that would still cause me issues. So, I'm not sure if they do or not…I'm still quite unclear on the exact classes that she's looking at.

Like Dave, many students did not know what guidance they needed until they were in the midst of dealing with a bureaucratic hurdle. When Dave started the process of calculating his GPA and talking with a counselor about academic renewal, he was working against a tight deadline to gather and apply information to submit his transfer application successfully. Dave was ultimately accepted to transfer to a research university, but his confusion about his GPA calculations led to stress and discouragement.

Community college procedures and policies have high learning costs, requiring that students engage in a time-consuming and intellectually demanding process to identify relevant information, understand it, and apply it in a way that forwards their educational aspirations. When students interact with the institution of the community college, they encounter processes—completing financial aid forms, formally declaring a major, taking steps to get off academic probation—they must navigate successfully to achieve their academic goals. Community college students in this study perceived that the college neglects to provide adequate or consistent

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information for meeting these bureaucratic hurdles. Much of students' academic decision making was characterized by a trial-and-error approach and facing hurdles in real time impeded students' progress, a pattern which was only exacerbated by the other circumstances of their lives. In several instances, it was only when students were leaving community college that they became aware of their incomplete support through missing program or transfer requirements.

Institutional Precarity

In their interactions with the college, students confronted the burden of adjusting to institutional instability. As described in the introduction, I term the instability that results from resource shortages at the community colleges *institutional precarity*. Community colleges in California have faced significant resource constraints. In the wake of the Great Recession, state appropriations for higher education were reduced by billions of dollars, dramatically increasing the cost of tuition and fees for community college students (Ma and Baum 2012; Bahr et al. 2015). Higher education funding in California has declined as a share of the budget over the past four decades; in 1976-77 higher education spending accounted for 18 percent of the state budget, but by 2016–17 had fallen to 12 percent (Cook 2017). When compared to the other sectors of California's public higher education system, community colleges receive the least amount of funding per student. Faced with these shortfalls, community colleges have responded by reducing the number of full-time equivalent instructors, increasing class sizes to new highs, as well as reducing the number of course sections offered (Bohn, Reyes, and Johnson 2013; Grosz, Kurlaender, and Stevens 2021). Unfortunately, research suggests that two primary ways community colleges have reduced costs—relying on part-time instruction and increasing student-faculty ratios—have hurt completion rates (Bound et al. 2010; Eagan Jr. and Jaegar 2009; Ehrenberg and Zhang 2005).

One key mechanism by which resource constraints may impact student completion outcomes is through a shortage of courses. Institutional resource constraints have resulted in what some would describe as impacted or overcrowded conditions in the community college system, with more students attempting to enroll in fewer available classes (Bahr et al. 2015). Overfilled classes or lengthy wait lists may prevent students from having the opportunity to enroll in courses needed for degree completion (Bohn et al. 2013). There has been some evidence of overcrowding, especially in key areas like math and biological sciences (Gurantz 2015). Additionally, not all courses are offered every semester and students have no way of predicting when a course will be offered. For example, nearly a quarter (24 percent) of technical education courses in California's community colleges are offered in the spring or fall only (Grosz et al. 2021).

Students repeatedly report in surveys that they cannot get the courses they want in order to graduate in a timely way (Kurlaender et al. 2014; Pearson Foundation 2012). A national survey conducted by the Pearson Foundation found that course access is a critical issue for community college students, with nearly four in 10 students (37 percent) unable to enroll in a class in the Fall 2011 semester because the class was full. The same survey found that California's community college students were almost twice as likely to report being unable to enroll in courses than the national average (Gurantz 2015). However previous empirical research has found mixed evidence for the idea that overcrowding slows or prevents student progress. One study at a public university in California found that course scarcity has no substantive impact on on-time graduation (Kurlaender et al. 2014).

When students encounter long wait lists or unavailable courses, it may have a ripple effect on their current and future course schedules and for their postsecondary goals more

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broadly. In spite of students' best efforts to create a specific plan of their preferred courses, they may log into the course registration site to find classes are already full. Even a single unavailable course can disturb students' carefully balanced schedules, designed to meet work and family obligations as well as their academic goals. Students who confront enrollment constraints, especially for required or prerequisite courses, may postpone taking prerequisite courses, delaying their plans for taking more advanced courses and extending their time to degree, or switch to a different program altogether (Grosz et al. 2021).

One expression of institutional precarity that students in this study encountered was overfilled courses. It is important to note that these findings are based on students' reports of course scarcity and are not a statement of actual program capacity, students' registration times, or course availability. Consistent with the reports of other studies, students reported that high-demand classes at the college, especially STEM and allied health classes, were often full before they could enroll (Goldrick-Rab 2010; Guarntz 2015). Tara enrolled at the community college in the town where she attended high school but left after one year when she could not get into the science and math classes that were required for her veterinarian technician degree.

> I was there for about a year, and then one semester they were so impacted that I applied to 10 courses and got into one… At that point I didn't really have a choice. I was [working] part time. But I really wanted to be full time…And the second semester was the same thing. So it was basically like not going to school at all.

Through impacted courses, the institution played a role in contributing to students' part-time enrollment. For Tara, discouraged by her lack of progress, she ultimately left that college and had a break in her enrollment before enrolling at Summit View several semesters later.

Arianna is another student who could not attend full time because she encountered issues with course availability. As described in past chapters, Arianna's academic engagement was

bounded by her responsibility caring for her niece. She also recounted how, when she went to enroll in classes in her first semester at Summit View, many of the classes she needed for her nursing major were unavailable. "I guess I came in a little late in the enrollment process so there wasn't [sic] too many classes I wanted or needed to take for nursing. So I'm like, I'll just take the class I need, not spend money on the ones I don't." Arianna's postsecondary pathway was prolonged by her responsibilities as well as by the college itself because, by students' accounts, Summit View does not offer enough sections of required classes. Arianna took only one class a semester, protracting her progress.

The limited availability of classes drove some students to leave the community college altogether. Two students in this study (Paula and Holly) left the community college for for-profit colleges where the structure of the college meant that they could complete their degree in a predictable amount of time. At Summit View, even if students created a two-year academic plan, the institution made it difficult to confirm in advance what courses would be offered in a future semester making it impossible for students to know with certainty that they could complete their degree in a specified amount of time (Scott-Clayton 2015:106). Over five years, Paula had bounced around between community colleges and private, for-profit vocational schools after she encountered difficulty enrolling in the nursing courses she needed. After a year of community college, Paula decided to enroll in a vocational nursing program at Unitec to "get the ball rolling a little quicker."

> So I decided because I'm not 21 [laughs] that I wanted to get the ball rolling a
> little quicker, and I knew that going private was gonna be one of the
> easiest ways to pursue the nursing license, so I went to Unitec and I did their
> vocational nursing program for a year to get it all out of the way…I just
> figured that if I really wanted to work in the field sooner, the one-year [program]
> was more practical for me at that time, 'cause then I could finish in a year and
> then knock everything out of the way, and then come back and do the rest. So
> practicality would be the answer.

The uncertainty of not knowing whether students could get the necessary courses to complete a program of study in the recommended time was impractical for students, especially those like Paula who wanted to enter the labor market quickly. In her case, the perceived difficulty of getting classes led her to choose a private, for-profit college, where she knew she could finish her courses in a year and test for her vocational nursing license. Overfilled classes affected students' college pathways, both through students' experience of limited course availability as well as the *perception* of unavailability.

The community college also offered classes but then cancelled them on short notice, which was another institutional barrier to students' progress. James enrolled at Summit View immediately after high school, interrupted his schooling, and reenrolled the following year. James had planned to take three classes one semester but could only take two because his physical education class was cancelled by the college due to low enrollment.

> I was planning on taking another one, but the class got dropped and it worked out because I wanted to work a little bit more. But I wanted to take the physical education and get it out of the way. But they dropped the class. So I didn't try to find another one because the dates didn't work. I enrolled in the class, and then before the first day of school—I think it was the day or two before—they dropped the class.

James was unexpectedly a part-time student because physical education, a required general education class, was cancelled days before the semester started. At each point when students encounter an overfilled, unavailable, or cancelled course, the student needs to make an active adjustment to get back on track. With each adjustment, the college encumbers students to react quickly and find an additional course that aligns with their academic plan, or, in the case of James, to take fewer classes dragging out their time to degree. When an institutional change

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disrupts a students' schedule in one semester, that can reverberate into future semesters, necessitating a shift to the students' plans for completion.

Institutional precarity at the college exerted influence on students' college plans. Unpredictable course offerings and overfilled classes prevented students from planning for smooth program completion, enrolling full time, or even enrolling at the community college at all. Even seemingly small disruptions in course offerings evolved into long delays in students' completion because each semester's courses are predicated on successful enrollment and completion in the previous semester. Students schedules were also carefully balanced to meet their employment and family commitments making last-minute, active adjustments to their schedules nearly impossible to accommodate.

Discussion

Structuralist theories of higher education argue that complex college structures systematically disadvantage community college students. I provide evidence for the kinds of barriers students encounter when they attempt to navigate complex college structures. I argue that community college policies have high *learning costs* (Herd and Moynihan 2018), requiring active effort on the part of students to seek out, interpret, and act on information. Students did not receive the help they needed in understanding policies, partly because counseling was not available to the extent that students needed and partly because students were reluctant to seek help from counselors. Without college-initiated guidance, students often learned of policies through trial and error, not realizing their need for support until they had already delayed their academic plan or become ineligible for financial aid. Students' interactions with the community college were also complicated by *institutional precarity* at the college where unpredictable circumstances,

such as classes being full or unavailable, amplified uncertainty in students' academic schedules as well as their schedules for meeting work and family obligations. Students bumped up against these structural obstacles throughout their college careers delaying their educational goals or leading them to dropout.

Structure vs. flexibility

Community college students face unique institutional conditions. Students are left on their own to navigate their pathways through the institution. They are free to pursue a credential, fulfill transfer requirements, or take classes to build skills or simply for their personal enrichment. They have broad flexibility to decide which courses to take, how many to take per term, and whether they will choose classes that meet during the day or at night or on the weekdays or weekends. Students do not need to declare a major to attend and can enroll in courses in any program of study. As they move through the college, they are not required to meet with a counselor and can modify their academic objectives with little oversight (Bahr 2013).

My findings show that the flexibility of community colleges is essential for students who would be excluded from traditional college pathways. For Joyce, college provides the flexibility of being able to enroll part time for a semester to focus on work after her husband is laid off. Rather than dropping out completely, she finishes her AA degree as a part-time student. For Christiana, the flexible admissions of the college allow her to enroll after she is academically dismissed from the four-year college where she starts her college career. By enrolling at the community college, which does not take into account her prior academic performance, she can get herself back on track and successfully transfers to a state college by our third interview. For Eduardo, who needs to work nearly full time to support himself, a traditional college would be

unavailable to him; he finds opportunity at the community college. The flexibility offered to students at the community college makes college attendance possible for students, especially nontraditional students and those historically excluded from traditional four-year colleges giving many a second chance at the benefits of a college degree.

Researchers have pointed out that this flexibility, while it opens up significant advantages for community college students, has notable disadvantages (Person et al. 2006; Scott-Clayton 2015; Shulock and Moore 2007). With so many options, and limited guidance, community college students face high learning costs in navigating the complexity of college. Drawing on findings from behavioral economics and psychology, researchers argue that the flexibility is likely to result in "less-than-optimal decisions by students about whether and how to persist toward a credential" (Scott-Clayton 2015). To address this, researchers have proposed reforms, a "guided pathways" model to make community colleges more tightly structured, centralizing services and helping students select and enter a program of study (Bailey et al. 2015; Moore and Shulock 2011).

My interviews lead me to believe that guided pathways reforms would certainly help some students, like Destiny and Eric profiled at the start of the chapter, who have difficulty choosing a field of study that they enjoy and where they will succeed. However, while informing students of the benefits and risks of certain pathways may help some students make more informed choices, a lack of information was not the primary barrier for many students in this study. Many students have a clear program of study in mind and were derailed by essential employment or carework, or institutional precarity at the college. Tara has held the same degree goal (of being a veterinary assistant) for her entire college career, yet she has struggled with family crises (her parents' health, their failing business) and an inability to consistently enroll

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full time at the college because of full classes. In her most recent college attempt, Amanda's primary obstacle was not a lack of information but the responsibility to work full time and the unexpected dissolution of her marriage. Even if students were to have perfect information, the institution would still present barriers to their success, as would the demands presented by their employers and families. In the conclusion, I turn to reforms to address structural challenges within and outside the college that impede students in their efforts to complete college.

Conclusion

Lashonda, 39-years-old, graduated from high school in 1997 and immediately enrolled at a four-year college in Georgia. She dropped out after the first year because she lacked a clear course of study and did not attempt college again until the early 2000s, when she attended a private vocational school for medical billing. Lashonda left the program before finishing her clinical hours, never earning her certificate. Over the next decade, she moved several times and bounced between low-wage jobs before enrolling at Summit View College in 2014. She recalled thinking, "I'm tired of the dead-end jobs. I need to go back to school." Initially taking Sonography courses, Lashonda later switched her major to Early Childhood Education and had been working and taking classes part time for three years when I met her in 2017. Over the course of two decades, Lashonda had attempted college three times at three different types of postsecondary institutions but had never completed a program of study.

Since enrolling at Summit View, Lashonda had worked to make progress on her associate degree, but her life was characterized by instability. Lashonda was housing insecure, worked precarious part-time jobs, and sacrificed her academic progress to support her family members. Over the two years I spoke with her, Lashonda moved four times, cycling between sharing apartments with her mom and sister and doubling up with other relatives. Just as many times, Lashonda switched jobs, sometimes of her own volition in search of a shorter commute or more amenable hours, but other times because she was fired for missing work because of family crises or ongoing obligations. Instability in Lashonda's life intersected with her academic obligations. Unpredictable events, like needing to pick up her niece from school, disrupted Lashonda's coursework.

> I feel like something's always putting me back, and I'm the type of person, when
> it comes to family, I never say no. And I think that was another thing, I told my

niece, "I can't do this anymore. I can't keep picking you up. You're gonna have to make another way. I'm sorry." I can't do it because I can't miss no more labs. It's a lot to make up. And it sucks because... I have to [make it up] on a day I'm working. So now I have to rearrange my work schedule so that I'm there in lab for three and a half hours.

One event—Lashonda's niece needing transportation—reverberated through both her work and school schedules. With every disruption that arose over the course of her enrollment, Lashonda had to readjust her schedules and find time to manage her family commitments in between, a process that often led to her losing out on work hours or cutting out study time. At her fourth interview, Lashonda was exhausted and discouraged from having to repeat failed classes and balance coursework, part-time employment, and care of her disabled mother. She described her remaining degree requirements.

> All I gotta do is get these two more ECEs [Early Childhood Education classes]. I got two more math, and once I'm done, I'm done. I can get my associates finally and be done. And I may eventually go back to school, but I'm going to take at least a year or two years off because I'm exhausted. It's just work. But I think it's discouraging because you feel like you go all of these semesters, you don't wanna waste time. Especially at my age…I just really want to finish. It's like you're reaching two steps up, and then you're going back two steps. You just want to be able to accomplish something.

For Lashonda, like many of the students I interviewed for this project, the frustration of unsteady progress took not only an academic toll but a psychological one. "Reaching two steps up and…going back two steps," whether due to failing and retaking classes or reducing her course load to meet other obligations, was exhausting and discouraging. Students like Lashonda want to escape the economic uncertainty of low-wage, dead-end jobs and achieve upward mobility, but while attending college, the context of their lives remains unstable. Many students cannot escape poverty—working, supporting other family members who lack economic security, and managing the disruption of housing instability—long enough to make meaningful academic progress.

My title, "Running in Place," reflects students' experience of their academic progress in community college. Many students, like Lashonda, felt that they were always moving one step forward and two steps back, working hard to meet their academic and personal commitments but making minimal progress towards their academic goals. The purpose of this dissertation was to identify factors that kept students from making smooth and consistent progress through community college. In this project, I sought to identify when and where in the course of students' academic careers they encountered obstacles and understand students' efforts to navigate those obstacles. I found that students in this study were enmeshed in a triad of forces—work, school, and family—that were often in tension with one another. To manage their competing priorities, students engaged in a range of strategies that often conflicted with their academic goals, reducing their course load, taking easier classes outside of their program requirements, or leaving college altogether.

In the following section, I describe where students stood in their college pathways at the end of the study period and summarize the overall argument of this dissertation. Then I outline the implications of these findings for academic research and sociological theory, describing how themes and conclusions drawn from across the manuscript speak to various streams of literature in sociology and education. I then offer my thoughts on contemporary legislative initiatives and social policies for combating low success rates for community college students. I describe how my findings support or disconfirm ongoing policy discussions and suggest possible institutional changes to community colleges that could alleviate the barriers faced by students.

Running in Place

All students in this study faced setbacks to completing their academic goals. In the face of difficulties, some achieved what they set out to do, others persisted towards their goals, and still

some were on educational paths that took them away from college. The academic outcomes of students in 2019, at the end of the two-year study period, are summarized in Table 1.1. Like Lashonda, the most common experience for students after two years was that they remained enrolled, but had not yet completed what they set out to achieve. While one in five students were no longer enrolled, a third had completed what they came for, whether to earn a degree, transfer, or both.[12]

Table 1.1: Students' degree outcomes, by number of students and percentages (in parentheses)

Still enrolled	14 (48)
Not enrolled	6 (21)
Completed	9 (31)
AA only	4 (14)
Transfer requirements only	3 (10)
Transfer and AA	2 (7)

Note: Enrollment status as of last contact with interviewee. Arianna is not included in this table since she declined to participate after the first interview.

Why do so many students who begin community college have prolonged college careers or leave before achieving their goals? Past research has shown that college students need to work for pay, have family obligations and outside financial responsibilities, and manage school with the demands of a complicated life outside of the classroom. I set out to understand how students encountered and responded to these stumbling blocks. Rather than being "outside" of students' academic experiences, I have argued that their external obligations are part and parcel to their academic decision-making and college experience. I conceptualized how obligations enter into students' college pathways, shaping the way they form their educational goals, organize course

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[12] A significant minority of community college students enter college with the goal of improving their skills and entering the workforce with higher wages without necessarily completing a certificate or degree (Booth and Bahr 2013). However, none of the students in this sample stated that was their educational goal.

taking, and even factor into their decisions about whether to attend college or not. Oftentimes, economic obstacles and complicated carework arrangements compelled students to subordinate their college aspirations to the material realities of their lives.

Recent research about community college students acknowledges that they often face major hurdles from out-of-school factors. Reports from foundations, research organizations, and college institutional research offices have documented that financial difficulties and the challenge of balancing school with other adult responsibilities are key reasons why students fail to complete college (Drekmeier and Tilghman 2010; Erisman and Steele 2015; Lane 2012; Ninon 2015; Paterson and Fowler 2013; Rapaport and Rolf 2013; Zalek 2013). Academic research has also acknowledged that students have "adult responsibilities" (Rosenbaum et al. 2006:2), face "external life events," and are caught up in a "work-family-schooling puzzle" (Grubb and Lazerson 2004:85). But while referencing students' obligations generally, few studies have described what unfolds when students encounter them. This dissertation took a different approach. I operationalized what students' external commitments are, presented conceptual frameworks to help us understand how differently positioned students respond to conflicts when they arise, and described the processes by which students manage these commitments in the institutional environment of the college.

In Chapter 2, I explored how family responsibilities introduced constraints and opportunities for community college students, introducing the concept of the family web as a lens through which to view such constraints and opportunities. While families matter for all students, not all students experienced familial obligations in the same way. I outlined three different configurations of family support and obligation and showed how family commitments influenced academic decision making. Students scheduled classes around family obligations, like

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their child's nap time or their spouse's work schedule, or adapted their degree goals to better meet their childcare obligations, like pursuing a certificate instead of a degree. Using the concept of the family web, I argued that the families of community college students can be both a source of support and a constraint.

In Chapter 3, I showed how students manage school and work. They used different strategies, which I term work flexing, to manipulate their work and course schedules, such as reducing their engagement with school to focus on work by withdrawing from classes, taking classes part-time, or leaving college due to economic stress. These choices may not seem optimal for students' academic progress, but they are logical in a context where work is necessary. Job quality is a key mechanism by which certain types of employment may be more conducive to college success, though few students held high quality jobs.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I considered what happens when students bring these obligations with them to the institution of the community college. Along with life circumstances, patterned features of the community college like impacted classes reverberate back on familial and employment experiences, introducing more uncertainty into students' lives. As they work to navigate the institutional environment, students were confronted with high learning costs because community colleges burden students with seeking information, initiating advising, and making sense of complex policies.

Taken together, these chapters provide compelling evidence for why many students were unable to complete their community college goals in a smooth and uninterrupted way. Work and family obligations outside of the college constrained their ability to dedicate time and attention towards their coursework. At the college itself, students lacked support to consistently make

decisions that forward their academic goals. In the subsequent section, I describe the contribution of these findings to contemporary academic debates in the fields of education and sociology.

Academic Implications and Directions for Future Research

For models of college completion

College student persistence and dropout have been studied for decades. Early theoretical models of college dropout did not consider students' external obligations and instead focused on the role of the institutional environment in students' decisions to stay in college or depart (Spady 1970; Tinto 1975). Tinto's (1975) paradigmatic longitudinal model of dropout posits that students who become integrated into the social and academic systems of the college develop stronger commitments to their goals and are more likely to persist and graduate. Without the inclusion of external commitments, the model's applicability to the community college context produced mixed results (Bers and Smith 1991; Voorhees 1987; Webb 1989). Qualitative studies have found that Tinto's core concept of integration is applicable to the community college environment but connections that facilitate the transfer of informational and institutional knowledge, rather than purely social interactions, are especially valuable for community college students (Deil-Amen 2011; Karp et al. 2008).

Later conceptualizations of college completion in the field of higher education considered how factors outside the college shaped completion. Tinto (1993) later revised his model to include external commitments, and other models of nontraditional and commuter students were developed which emphasized the external environment (Bean and Metzner 1985; Kember 1989). Bean and Metzner (1985) theorize that, for nontraditional students, variables from the outside environment—including finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, and family

responsibilities—may be of greater importance than academic variables or college social integration. Additionally, newer models (Davidson and Wilson 2017; Stuart, Rios-Aguilar, and Deil-Amen 2014) have conceptualized completion in the community college setting and paid closer to consideration to family and student employment contexts.

Following these newer models, my findings demonstrate how the obligations students hold off campus are central to their college experiences. However, my findings suggest that work and family obligations operate in a different way than has been conceptualized in the past, particularly in regards to how family shapes college completion. While Tinto (1975) originally argued that students needed to break away from past communities, including family, to assimilate and persist in college, we now know that many students benefit when they maintain connections with their communities (Tierney 1992; Torres 2003). Past research reveals the psychological and emotional benefits of family connections, showing that families can provide social support in cases where students of color or low-income students feel a sense of social exclusion from their peers (Bergerson 2007; Nora 2001; Stuber 2011). Building on this research, my findings show that families also play an important role in providing material and practical support while in college. My findings suggest that being integrated into their families and the financial and practical support they offer is what makes college possible for many community college students.

It is also the case that family and employment are competing external pressures on students' time and energy. My dissertation provides evidence for how these demands shape students' intentions to attend college and their academic and institutional choices. Overall, the central concern of past models of college completion was to understand how events within the institution come to shape the process of dropout (Tinto 1993). Perhaps rather than incorporating

employment and family obligations into existing models, future research can be used to develop models of college departure at community colleges that focus on factors and processes outside of the institution. A theoretical model could conceptualize how external commitments operate to support students' academic goals while also detracting from them. Students in this study faced competing pressures from their work and family obligations, but these same obligations provided the practical, emotional, and financial support necessary for college enrollment. Future research could also consider the language we use to describe and analyze these commitments. My research suggests they are not "external" or outside of students' college choices and goals. Perhaps "accompanying" or "continuous" obligations would better capture how college is one of many ongoing commitments for today's students.

For sociological studies of the college experience

In addition to models of college completion, this study contributes to research in the sociology of higher education. Within this subfield, there is a growing body of research investigating what Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum (2008) call "the experiential core of college life—the space between the elaborately studied moments of college entry and exit" (2008:131). Studies of college experiences have devoted particular attention to more elite segments of higher education, especially highly selective four-year colleges and universities. Studies at these institutions find that the social aspects of college life—friendships, partying, and finding sexual and romantic partners—are a defining feature of students' experiences (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; McCabe 2016). As described earlier, the field of higher education has also focused on social experiences in college by examining the role that social integration plays in college persistence.

However, my findings suggest that in the community college context, social interactions are not a primary factor in shaping students' experiences. None of the students I spoke with were

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engaged in explicitly social activities with other students. This finding is supported by other studies, which have suggested that the social aspects of college may be less central for first-generation and lower-income students who see academics as the main purpose of college (Bergerson 2007; Mullen 2010). Students in this study did not engage in social activities with other students because they were torn in several different directions, often subordinating academics to work and family demands. Although their experiences were not defined by social relationships on campus, community college students do experience schooling in a thick web of social relationships outside of the college with their immediate and extended family members. As I argued in Chapter 2, students' families, rather than social connections on campus, provided them with much of what they needed to get through school, including money, assistance, and emotional support.

It is important to consider that the dynamics described in this dissertation may not be isolated to students attending community colleges. What is true for community college students—that they are managing family commitments—is also true of many undergraduates today. Four-year college students who live at home or near their families may be subject to the *family web* while they are enrolled. Research on four-year college students suggests that family obligations can continue even when students attend college away from home (Covarrubias et al. 2019; Gilford and Reynolds 2011; Jack 2019b). Students who attend college away from home may be subject to other kinds of interdependencies, such as emotional labor, pressure to visit home more often, or discomfort being away from family. Research and recommendations in this manuscript may also be relevant for institutions that serve similar populations of students, such as open-access public four-year colleges who serve large shares of economically disadvantaged students like the ones profiled in this study who were especially interdependent with their

families. Many students who were living at residential colleges abruptly moved home during the Covid-19 pandemic and may have needed to provide additional practical and financial support as many students and their families faced deep financial hardship. Future research is needed to examine how the dynamics of students' family webs have shifted in light of the coronavirus outbreak.

Other sociological research speaks more directly to the qualitative experiences of community college students. Much of the recent research examines students' narrative frameworks for understanding their college aspirations and experiences (Deterding 2015; Holland and DeLuca 2016; Nielsen 2015; Silva and Snellman 2018). The logics that students employ in their narratives of why they attend college are both instrumental—understanding the value of college in its support of economic stability and particular career goals—as well as expressive—college as a way to "be somebody." Students use the moral status of being a college student to distance themselves from their low-income origins and their peers who are dependent on others or state support (Deterding 2015). In this way, educational training serves both an instrumental function, providing financial and career benefits, and a moral one: it structures students' personal narratives about moving forward into a better future, allowing them to construct a narrative of upward mobility. Other studies find a similar duality about the purpose of college as being both pragmatic but also moral (Nielsen 2015; Silva and Snellman 2018). Some of my interviewees had similar personal narratives, something I hope to expand on in future research.

One central question in this stream of literature concerns how these narratives relate to students' college goals and plans. One implication of the moral and emotional value of college attendance is that students do not abandon their postsecondary goals even in the face of setbacks.

Nielsen (2015) finds that students' aspirations "hold steady" even when they have slow or impeded progress. For the low-income Black women in his study, their college aspirations remained stable over long periods of time. Holland and DeLuca (2016) similarly found that respondents cling to the idea of postsecondary education, even when their plans fall farther out of reach. Whether students face interrupted enrollment across multiple institutions or setbacks due to other life circumstances, they continue to maintain their educational goals, have plans to return to college if they depart, and aspire to bachelor's degrees (Deterding 2015).

Data from this study affirms that students continue to value college attendance in the midst of setbacks. However, rather than stay completely committed to their college plans altogether, I found evidence that students make subtle adjustments to their goals when they encounter hurdles. For example, in Chapter 4, I described how Alexa was not informed about the difference between degree and transfer requirements, and after learning that she would need to remain in college for additional semesters to complete additional courses, decided to leave Summit View with the associate degree alone and abandon her goal of completing her transfer requirements. In many instances, students changed their course of study when they faced course scarcity or did not perform well in major courses (at least in part because they were managing competing demands). Some students did stay enrolled and committed to their initial goal, but most made subtle changes to their goals over time.

For the sociology of precarity and instability

The theoretical frameworks that help us understand the contemporary community college student experience come not from the sociology of higher education, but from sociological studies of uncertainty, precarity, and instability. Within sociology, and especially in the study of work and family, there has been a newfound focus on dynamics of unpredictability. More people are living

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precarious lives across the income spectrum and families are adjusting to and making sense of reduced security and increased risk (Pugh and Cooper 2020). Past research has shown how insecurity reverberates in people's family lives (Cooper 2014), in their ideas about intimacy and relationships (Pugh 2015), and in the narratives they use to describe their life transitions (Silva 2013). As I laid out in Chapter 1, I examine dynamics of unpredictability among community college students, paying particular attention to the continual change that students face in economic, social, and academic contexts.

First, community college students today face economic uncertainty. In what she terms "the new economics of college," Sara Goldrick-Rab describes how college has become more expensive with rising tuition and increases in cost of living expenses (Goldrick-Rab 2016). College has also become more difficult to afford due to the declining value of the minimum wage and the purchasing power of the Pell Grant. Additionally, macroeconomic changes have led to rising economic risks. Economic shocks, the rise of globalization, a shift from a manufacturing- to a service-based economy, the rise of contingent work, and the privatization of risk have led to greater levels of economic insecurity and more uncertainty for working students and their families. Along with the growth of low-wage service jobs have come just-in-time scheduling practices in which employers abruptly cancel shifts or send workers home early, yet expect employees to be on-call to come in or stay late when needed (Halpin 2015). The rise in scheduling instability, with hours that fluctuate each week and added or cancelled shifts, means that workers today face spikes and dips of income (Morduch and Schneider 2017).

Second, students face social uncertainty marked by pathways to adulthood that are longer and more diverse than ever. Several recent studies describe a new sense of social uncertainty in the lives of young adults (Ray 2018; Silva 2013). With more disorderly pathways to adulthood,

educational attainment, particularly for disadvantaged students, is a process that unfolds over time and interacts with other events in people's lives: marriage, divorce, childbirth, job loss, and family illness (Giudici and Pallas 2014; Roksa and Velez 2010).

Finally, students face academic uncertainty in a context of declining public investment in higher education. Today's public colleges have less money to put towards supporting students. In addition to reductions in public commitments to higher education, declines in state funding have paralleled a shift in spending towards other priorities like the prison industry in California (Hamilton and Nielsen 2021:13). Universities are shifting their organizational practices and priorities in response to postsecondary defunding, and budget cuts have led to significant reductions in student services, fewer full-time faculty, and reports of impacted classes and course scarcity (Goldrick-Rab 2016; Hamilton and Nielsen 2021). All of these large-scale economic, social, and academic trends make community college students' lives less secure and more uncertain.

Cooper and Pugh's (2020) concept of *doing dynamism* illustrates "the ongoing activity involved as people wrestle with the challenges of insecurity" (Cooper and Pugh 2020:273). Several recent in-depth and longitudinal ethnographies examine instability dynamics among both among middle-class and upper-income families (Cooper 2014; Pugh 2015) as well as low-income families (Desmond 2016; Edin and Schaefer 2015), and also beyond the economic sphere in life transitions, relationships, and meanings of security.

This dissertation is a study of how community college students "do dynamism" while managing the uncertainty in their academic and personal lives. I understand students' experiences as dynamic, studying multiple spheres of their lives over time. In the context of rising uncertainty due to the economic, social, and academic factors described above, insecurity

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is also a facet of students' postsecondary experiences and trajectories. In the face of uncertainty, I show the practices and negotiations that undergird students' everyday experiences at school. I examine how students respond and adapt to unstable conditions, providing a fine-grained picture of "doing dynamism" in the community college context by identifying processes like work flexing, strategies of making decisions by trial-and-error, and showing the financial and carework negotiations within students' families on a day-to-day basis. Future research can continue to explore how postsecondary institutions are another site for understanding increasing precarity and how instability, in addition to fewer resources, is a defining feature of students' postsecondary pathways.

In addition to the uncertainty brought about by macro social and economic factors, students in this study were also subject to the routine uncertainty of unanticipated events in their daily lives. Routine disruptions (Clawson and Gerstel 2014) including one's own illness, an unavailable babysitter, a car crash, or other unpredictable events often arose in the course of students' schooling journeys. Uncertainty in both of these forms, whether due to larger trends towards greater unpredictability or routine disruptions, placed students' educational plans in jeopardy. Even when students did have carefully orchestrated plans, seemingly small occurrences like a child's illness or a change in a work schedule could sabotage their academic studies (Sallee and Cox 2019). I show how students adapt to and cope with these changes as they try to meet their academic goals in search of a better job, higher wages, and a more stable life. In my research, the theme of instability arose through the analysis of student interviews. Future studies might explicitly examine how instability functions as a mechanism that shapes patterns in college attendance and completion.

For social inequality

Finally, this research speaks to ongoing scholarly debates about the reproduction of social inequality. In this section, I explore whether and how students' experiences with obligations outside the classroom and their experiences navigating the institutional environment are patterned by social class, gender, race, and immigration generation and status.

Throughout this dissertation, I have called attention to how students' experiences vary based on their social class backgrounds. In the case of work, we know that nationally the amount and type of work varies between high- and low-income students. Low-income working students tend to work longer hours than their high-income counterparts (Carnevale and Smith 2018), and low-income workers in general are more likely to hold jobs with unpredictable work hours (Finnigan 2018; Schneider and Harknett 2021). In this study, I identified how the strategies students use to manage school-employment conflicts are also patterned by social class. For low-income students, work was an economic necessity, and they were less likely to lessen their work obligations to focus on school.

People's ability to respond to the unpredictable events outlined in the last section are also socially patterned along the fault lines of class (Clawson and Gerstel 2014). Those students who have private access to economic resources can more easily recover from inevitable disruptions. A broken-down car meant that low-income students had to miss class (like Eduardo) or even left college altogether (in the case of Harlan), but middle-class students like Eric borrowed his parents' car and avoided a disruption in his academic commitments. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds had more stability overall and more resources to troubleshoot when unexpected events arose.

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In my sample, I did not identify strong patterns in students' obligations or their strategies for managing those obligations on the basis of gender. There are mixed gender patterns in the case of students' family webs. In the case of childcare, more women than men in my sample were parents to young children: five women were parents to dependent children compared to one male student. As I described in Chapter 2, caring for young children was a significant responsibility that made it difficult to prioritize school, and this would suggest that women are more burdened by this responsibility than men. However, in the case of caring for siblings and elderly parents, obligations seemed to be shared equally between men and women; for example, Tom and Nick cared for their siblings and Jessi cared for her uncle and mother. In the case of financial obligations to family, women appeared to have greater financial obligations than men, either in the expectation that they would cover their own expenses or in helping their family members financially. However, I recruited this sample with maximum heterogeneity in mind. I did not intentionally design my sampling strategy to test for differences between genders. To this point, one limitation in my sample is that only two male respondents are over age 30 compared to six female participants. I hesitate to attribute differences in carework and financial responsibilities to gender when it is possible that age differences explain these patterns in obligations. Future studies could use a sampling framework that allows them to probe age and gender differences more intentionally.

With this small sample, I did not identify clear patterns by race in the amount or type of obligations or how students responded to them. In the case of the family web, Latinx students were more often interdependent with their families (n=4) compared with white students (n=3), students who identified with two or more races (n=3), Black students (n=2), and Asian American students (n=1). Prior research has identified variation by race in adolescents' values and

regarding their duties to assist, respect, and support their families, differences that remain consistent across youth's gender, family composition, and social class (Fuligni and Pedersen 2002; Fuligni, Tseng, and Lam 1999; Telzer and Fuligni 2009). These studies document that Latinx and Asian American adolescents have a stronger sense of obligation to support and assist their families than their white peers. Additional studies are needed that examine whether a sense of family obligation, as well as the provision of practical, carework, and financial support, are more common among Asian American and Latinx college students.

With a sample size of 30 and six race categories, I am cautious about making assertions about differences between ethnoracial groups. Additionally, I did not purposively sample students with attention to class variations within ethnoracial groups, and for that reason, middle-class white students (n=4) are overrepresented compared to middle-class students of color (n=2). Future research could intentionally sample students for social class variation within ethnoracial groups, or perhaps recruit students from a select number of ethnoracial categories to test cross-class variation within and between races.

While ethnoracial patterns were not strongly observable in my sample, I would expect that race shapes students' experience of the college institutional environment. In the case of high learning costs and confronting institutional burdens, students of color may feel excluded from institutional settings and support staff designed to help them navigate bureaucratic hurdles. Students' perceptions of discrimination and prejudice on campus shape their academic and social experiences and their intellectual development (Hurtado and Ponjuan 2005; Nora and Cabrera 1996). Racism and the perception of racial hostility on campus interferes with Black and Latinx students' ability to integrate into the college environment and build a sense of attachment to the college (Cabrera et al. 1999; Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler 1996). Students in this study across

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ethnoracial groups reported that they were hesitant to seek advice from counselors. However future research is needed to examine the relationship between race and help-seeking at community colleges. If students of color avoid seeking advice due to experiences of racism on campus, they may not benefit from the positive role that institutional agents can play in providing social and institutional support. Stanton-Salazar's (1997; 2011) research shows how institutional agents like teachers and counselors are vital in expanding the support networks of low-income and racially minoritized students. In other words, students of color may be disproportionately harmed by insufficient counseling and institutional support at community colleges.

Finally, I turn to patterns by immigration status. In Chapter 2, I described how students who are first- or second-generation immigrants encountered unique familial obligations related to assisting family members in navigating institutional settings. While none of the students in my sample (or their parents) were undocumented, research about undocumented community college students suggests that they face unique challenges to completion specifically in regards to work and family obligations. Terriquez (2015) found that, like other young adult children of immigrants, undocumented community college students felt compelled to provide financial support to their families (Fuligni and Pedersen 2002). Employment was often essential for undocumented students because "the legal status of their undocumented parents and other family members curtailed their family's earning power" (Terriquez 2015:1316). Terriquez (2015) identified a pattern of students stopping out and restarting enrollment because their families needed them to find full-time work. Applying the framework of the family web, undocumented community college students are highly interdependent with their families, and the master status of documentation presents unique conditions that intensify these interdependencies. Further

investigation is needed into how documentation status shapes work, family, and academic

conflicts, both for students who are undocumented and their families.

Policy Implications

Despite considerable efforts by community colleges to support students' progress, many students

do not persist toward their educational goals. In this section, I describe how community colleges

can effectively support students as they manage multiple and conflicting responsibilities.

Nationally, a broader public investment in the social safety net could provide a baseline level of

aid for students, and at community colleges, several holistic programs show promising results in

improving student success.

Broader public investment in social insurance and higher education

Broader investments in social supports are necessary for students to meet their basic needs. In

our deeply inequitable society, it is not possible to achieve educational equity without social and

economic policies that complement educational opportunities (Grubb and Lazerson 2004:85). In

their book *The Education Gospel*, Grubb and Lazerson (2004) argue that broader social policies

are necessary if students are to resolve the dilemmas they face in meeting their competing

obligations.

> The responsibilities for unscrambling the work-family-schooling puzzle lie in
> other areas of social policy. If we had a universal child care program for toddlers
> two to five, one dimension of family stress would be reduced. If we had a system
> of family support centers, or community mental health centers, other family crises
> might be alleviated. If there were universal health coverage or broad access to
> community health clinics, then the time required to scrounge health care at
> emergency rooms would be reduced. If there were greater efforts to reconstruct
> the low-wage labor market so that young students could earn a decent wage, then
> the total amount of necessary employment would be reduced. If student aid were
> expanded and made more available to community college and part-time

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students…then another dimension of the work-family-schooling dilemma would be less problematic (Grubb and Lazerson 2004:101).

As Grubb and Lazerson describe, programs beyond colleges themselves–universal childcare, community mental health centers, universal health coverage, and a higher minimum wage—are necessary to create the social and economic conditions for students to benefit from a community college education. A more comprehensive social safety net is a necessary precondition for students to realize educational opportunity.

Public benefit programs can act as an important source of financial support for community college students. One organization, Single Stop, is helping to connect students to existing social service programs. Single Stop operates through offices on community college campuses that support students and their families by offering screening and application assistance to obtain public benefits including health insurance, unemployment insurance, and childcare assistance, and providing immigration consultation, tax preparation, and other services. Several evaluations have found that the use of Single Stop was associated with improved postsecondary outcomes. Students who used Single Stop were more likely to persist and attempt more credits than students who did not (Daugherty, Johnston, and Berglund 2020; Goldrick-Rab et al. 2013; What Works Clearinghouse 2020). Connecting community college students to existing support is critical, as many students who are eligible for existing support do not receive it. Barely one in five food-insecure students at California Community Colleges receive CalFresh, California's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (Goldrick-Rab and Cochrane 2019). Through Single Stop or other similar offices, colleges could do more to educate and enroll students in existing social service programs. Community colleges should consider offering offices on all campuses similar to Single Stop that create a central location for access to

wraparound services and provide greater access to government benefit programs (Daugherty et al. 2020).

By growing and reforming the statewide financial aid program, California can do more to support students who are struggling to meet their basic needs. California's primary state-funded student financial aid program, Cal Grant, is largely focused on covering tuition and fees. Especially at community colleges, students' greatest needs are not related to tuition, but to housing, food, transportation, and textbooks. The Century Foundation recommends that California shift from a financial aid system focused on tuition costs to one that takes into consideration each student's full college expenses (California Student Aid Commission 2020; Shireman, Mishory, and Baum 2018). Additionally, California Community Colleges could explore initiatives for aid targeted to student expenses, such as providing transportation vouchers, a systemwide school lunch program, pre-purchasing textbooks for key courses, expanding on-campus childcare centers, and research creative options to help students find affordable housing (including unused spaces in residence halls and host home programs) (Goldrick-Rab and Cochrane 2019; Shireman et al. 2018). Additional access to grant aid would make it possible for more students to focus on their education rather than work.

The 2021 state budget includes promising investments in Cal Grant and other funding for student needs. California recently eliminated eligibility requirements for the Cal Grant related to age and students who take time off after high school, a change that supports students returning to college like many of those in this study (Granville 2021). The recent state budget also includes funding for an emergency aid program as well as basic needs centers, and my research suggests an increasing investment in these areas will greatly benefit students.

Families and childcare

Colleges can adopt policies and practices that prioritize the needs of students with caregiving duties. Many of the existing reforms are geared towards improving the ability of parenting students to thrive in and graduate from college. Through their initiative on student parents, the Institute for Women's Policy Research makes recommendations for how colleges can support student parents in their educational attainment. Colleges could improve outcomes for parenting students by improving the infrastructure of affordable childcare nationally. On the federal level, substantial investment in the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) grant program, which provides childcare subsidies for low-income students, would make community-based childcare more accessible. Sixty percent of California residents live in a childcare desert in which licensed or high-quality affordable options are scant (Huerta et al. 2021). A recent study at a California Community College found that some parents were unable to use on-campus childcare centers because of limited space and hours or because their children did not meet the age requirements (Huerta et al. 2021). My findings suggest that greater access to community- or college-based childcare facilities may also help students who were not parents themselves, but who had childcare responsibilities for young siblings, nieces, or nephews.

Studies also report that parenting students feel the community college campus environment is unwelcoming to them (Huerta et al. 2021; Sallee and Cox 2019). To address this, colleges could establish learning communities, organize information networks, or provide physical spaces for student parents where they can address common issues for parenting students like stress, time management, and studying strategies (Contreras-Mendez and Reichlin Cruse 2021; Peterson 2016).

Increased financial support paired with additional services improves the outcomes of parenting students. In California, CalWORKs (California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids) is the state's primary cash assistance program for low-income adults with children, providing financial assistance and services like counseling, case management, tutoring, and transportation assistance. A recent study of parenting students who participated in the CalWORKS program found that students' academic performance was better during the years when they were enrolled in CalWORKs (McConville, Bohn, and Brooks 2020). Programs like CalWORKs that provide wraparound services may be especially important for students with caregiving responsibilities.

Workers and employment

Like many workers in California, most students in this study worked in the service sector where work schedules were often unpredictable and unstable. A recent survey of nearly 8,000 service sector workers in California found that scheduling practices that create unpredictable conditions for workers were widespread. More than half of workers got less than two weeks' notice of their schedule, more than two in three experienced last-minute changes to their schedules, and more than a quarter worked on-call (Schneider and Harknett 2020).

Legislative efforts to stabilize employee schedules could greatly benefit working students in this study. In California, employers are already required to pay workers who are sent home before completing their full shifts, but scheduling policies can go further (National Partnership for Women and Families 2017). The cities of San Francisco, San Jose, and Emeryville have implemented legislation that requires chain stores to provide two weeks' advance notice of work schedules (Schneider and Harknett 2020). At the federal level, the Schedules that Work Act (H.R. 2942) would protect workers from scheduling changes and ensure they receive

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compensation when shifts are changed or scheduled with short notice (National Partnership for Women and Families 2017). My research provides support for the notion that requiring advance notice of scheduling would be beneficial to students in prioritizing their schoolwork.

If students had higher earnings, they could afford to work fewer hours and dedicate more time to school. Although the minimum wage in California has risen steadily from $10 per hour in 2017 to $12 per hour in 2020, half of workers still earn less than $15 an hour (Schneider and Harknett 2020). These low wages are insufficient to meet basic needs in California, where the estimated living wage for a worker with a child is $31.25 per hour (Schneider and Harknett 2020). Increased wages would greatly ease students' financial stress.

Community colleges also have a vested interest in supporting students in their employment. In Chapter 3, I discussed how students reduced school as a way to manage employment and coursework. This process has implications for both students and colleges. When students reduced school for work, they lost financial aid and increased their time to degree. At the institutional level, students reducing school for work could lead to a loss of revenue for colleges, since some funding is awarded on the basis of the number of students who are enrolled full time (Kahlenberg et al. 2018).

Comprehensive reforms for community colleges

In Chapter 4, I outlined several points in students' community college pathways where they encountered administrative burdens: in choosing a major, planning courses, seeking an appointment with a counselor, transitioning from remedial to degree-bearing coursework, and exiting the community college with a credential or through transfer. Students described high learning costs in figuring out what they needed and that they struggled to understand and evaluate different options. Bailey et al. (2015) describe these as outcomes of the "cafeteria

model," a term used to illustrate how community colleges are organized around disconnected courses with limited institutional guidance in orientation, advising, and course registration.

By rethinking the way they organize programs of study, support services, and instruction, some researchers argue, colleges can substantially increase their rates of student success. Instead of leaving students to find their own path through college, a "guided pathways" model presents courses in coherent programs of study as part of "meta-majors," broad fields of interest intended to get students started down an educational path. In this alternative model, students are provided with program maps that outline a default sequence of courses. Faculty and advisors track students' progress using technological tools that alert them if students making slow progress or deviating from the program map. The intention behind guided pathways is to help students choose fields of study, gain momentum in course taking, and help students transfer or complete credentials efficiently.

My findings suggest that students would benefit from institutional reforms to make college more predictable and dependable, such as highly prescribed course sequences where students can plan for course offerings. But while some features of the guided pathways model are compelling, it overlooks how the context of students' lives frames their enrollment and academic choices (Schudde and Grodsky 2018). For example, the guided pathways model is "predicated on the expectation that students can invest time and money into full-time college attendance" (Schudde and Grodsky 2018:423). The findings from this dissertation show that this is often impossible when students need to be employed and supporting their families. As I described in Chapter 4, solutions like guided pathways that are aimed at information and institutional reforms will be ineffective in addressing many of the barriers that community college students face. While they may guide students through their academic challenges, they are not designed to

attend to students' lived realities. The most effective models for improving student success at community colleges must address both academic and non-academic struggles (Schudde and Grodsky 2018).

My findings suggest that comprehensive interventions would be most effective in supporting students. A few programs designed to address factors both in and outside of school have been tested and found to have large positive impacts on rates of graduation and transfer to four-year colleges. The City University of New York system, including seven community colleges, offers the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) to low-income students who attend college full time. ASAP is a comprehensive reform program that integrates tuition waivers and additional financial aid, tutoring, free textbooks, free public transportation, priority registration, and other extra support services (Bailey et al. 2015:76; Schudde and Grodsky 2018). According to a study that used randomized assignment to evaluate the effects of ASAP, the program nearly doubled the share of community college students graduating within three years. Forty percent of ASAP students completed compared to 22 percent of those in traditional community college programming (Scrivener et al. 2015).

A substantial component of the ASAP program is structural changes to advising. The ASAP program includes intensive and sustained counseling where students are required to meet with their advisors at least twice a month and with career specialists at least once a semester. Students' advisors also have lower caseloads of 60 to 80 students compared to as many as 1,500, allowing them to meet with students more frequently and provide individual attention (Scrivener et al. 2015). My findings suggest that changes and investments in student advising are critical for supporting students. Mandating advising and expanding the number of counselors would assist students, especially first-generation students who need additional support in navigating college

structures. Even without the additional financial and programmatic supports, advising has positive effects for community college students' persistence and transfer rates (Bahr 2008). A randomized experiment where coaches initiated contact with students to provide support, with a specific focus on students' lives outside of school, increased the likelihood that students would persist, even after the coaching had ended (Bettinger and Baker 2014).

Another comprehensive program with promising results for community college students is Stay the Course. In the program's treatment group, students were paired with a social service provider who offered students coaching, mentoring, and referral services, and access to emergency financial assistance (Evans et al. 2020). The program significantly increased persistence and degree completion for women, tripling associate degree receipt by 31.5 percentage points (Evans et al. 2020). Interestingly, students who were offered only emergency financial aid, but not case-management services, had no improvement in persistence or completion rates. This suggests that the barriers low-income students face are not only financial, but also related to external obligations that were addressed in assessments with the social service provider. Injecting more funding into California Community Colleges would allow them to test whether other holistic approaches (Dawson, Kearney, and Sullivan 2020) are effective in other college systems.

My research suggests that comprehensive reforms at colleges, while they would require a substantial financial investment, would address many of the barriers faced by students in this study. However, simply making policy adjustments to the U.S. educational system will not result in greater college completion and social mobility. Findings from my dissertation show that the larger forces driving college success are related to financial insecurity, employment, and the work of keeping families afloat. Fundamental changes to U.S. economic and social policies are

necessary to address the insecurity faced by community college students and improve their

college outcomes.

Appendix

Sample Interview Guide

Round 1 Interview Protocol

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this interview. The purpose of this project is to explore what it's like for students to attend community college today. I will ask you a series of questions about your higher education choices and history, your work and family demands, and your goals for the future. The interview should take about an hour, but it sometimes takes longer. If at any time you feel uncomfortable or don't want to answer a question, just let me know and we will move on or stop the interview.

Everything you share with me today is confidential—no one will have access to your identity or the identity of this college besides me. Before we start, could you please look over this form and let me know if you agree to take part in this study? [Present the consent form and get verbal confirmation as per IRB requirement. Then ask whether student would prefer an Amazon or WalMart gift card and sign Interview Compensation form.]

College Choice, Higher Education Journey, Curricular and Enrollment Decisions
1. Let's think back to when you were in high school. Did you graduate from high school? Walk me through the steps you went through when you were deciding what to do after graduation. What kinds of choices did you have? Did you think about college? About a job? About joining the military?
2. When did you first decide to go to college? What made you decide to enroll in college?
3. How long have you been going to college here? What is your best guess of how many classes you have taken so far?
4. What made you choose this college? Have you ever been to another college besides this one? What made you choose that college? Walk me through your decision to leave there. What was going on in your life at that time?
5. Have you been enrolled in college for every semester since you started? Could you tell me about a semester when you weren't enrolled? What was going on in your life at that time?
6. Are you in school part time or full time? How did you decide to go to college part time or full time? Have you always been part time or full time?
7. How did you choose your classes this semester?
8. Are you working towards a specific major or degree? How did you select that major?

Family and Home
1. Has anyone in your family gone to college? Did you discuss going to college with them?
2. What did your parents or guardians do when you were growing up? Did they graduate from high school or college?
3. Do you have siblings? Did they graduate from high school? College?
4. Do you have children? How many? Who do they live with? Do you think being a parent affects your schoolwork in a particular way? How? Can you give me an example? Does being a parent and a student impact the classes you take here? What are the benefits of parenting while enrolled in college? What are the drawbacks?
5. How do you get to and from campus? How reliable would you say that form of transportation is? Has there ever been a time that you missed class because of transportation? How long does it take you?
6. Whom do you live with now? How long have you lived there? How did you make the choice to live in this place? Can you remember any times since you've been in college when you worried

about where you would live, or how you would afford to pay rent? How often have you moved? How does where you're staying impact your college experience?

Work and Finances

7. Are you currently working while in college? How long have you had this job? Have you had other jobs while in college?
8. What is your work schedule like? Do the number of hours or schedule vary from week to week? How far in advance in the schedule released? Could you please tell me about how you figure out your work and class schedule? If there is ever a time when work and school conflict, which do you choose?
9. Does your job pay you enough to pay your bills? What kinds of bills do you have to pay every month?
10. What kinds of income sources do you rely on? Financial aid, help from friends or family members, support from the government, loans or credit card payments?
11. Do you apply for financial aid? Do you receive financial aid? What types of financial aid do you receive?
12. Has there been a time since you've been in college when you couldn't pay the bills, or worried about money? How did you get through it?
13. Have you ever worried whether your food would run out before you got money to buy more? Was there ever a time when you couldn't eat balanced meals because you couldn't afford it? Have you ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals when there wasn't enough food?
14. Does your life feel stable to you? Is there someone you can count on if something unexpected comes up? Is there someone you could borrow money from if you needed to?
15. What social class would you put yourself in?

College Experience and Aspirations

1. How's college going for you? Are you doing as well in your classes as you'd like?
2. What has helped you succeed in college? What resources or opportunities assisted you in staying in college?
3. Has anyone (family member, teacher, mentor, faculty, college staff) assisted you in staying in college? What kinds of support do they provide?
4. Have you ever failed or withdrawn from a class? What made the course difficult for you? What was happening in your life at that time?
5. Can you recall a specific time when you were struggling in college? What made it difficult for you? Do you remember how you got through that?
6. What are things that have kept you from succeeding in college? What obstacles have you faced? personal, institutional, financial?
7. Can you recall a specific time when college felt easy for you? What do you think made it easy?
8. Do you ever skip class? Could you tell me about the last time you skipped class?
9. Can you remember any times when your race/class/gender/sexuality made achieving your education goals harder for you? When you experienced discrimination?
10. Do you plan to be enrolled here next semester? What are your plans for the next semester? For the next year?
11. What do you think is the hardest thing about being a student today? What is your favorite thing about being a student today?
12. What could the college do to make it easier for you to get your degree?
13. Where do you see yourself in ten years?

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