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Moving to and through Community College:
Postsecondary Aspirations and Divergent Outcomes

by

Nga Kim Huynh

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

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Education

in the

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of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

Committee in charge:

Professor W. Norton Grubb, Chair
Professor Judith Warren Little
Professor Alex Saragoza

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Moving to and through Community College:

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by

Nga Kim Huynh
Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Berkeley

Professor W. Norton Grubb, Chair

Community college has always been an attractive choice for many from the perspective that it offers access to higher education without the constraints typical of more elite four-year institutions. But while its egalitarian mission offers potentially unlimited second chances, the reality of persistent low attainment rates—despite investments in new initiatives and interventions—brings us back to the question of how community colleges both promote and constrain opportunities for students.

To shed light on the viability of community college as an avenue to higher education, this study investigated the educational experiences of a group of students who transitioned directly from high school to community college in the fall of 2007. The design of the study employed multiple in-depth interviews with students over a twenty-month period. Forty youths from four high schools in two urban school districts in northern California were recruited and interviewed in the spring of 2007. Subsequent interviews were conducted over three semesters in community college. Information from informal communication with student participants and interviews with key administrators and staff at one community college district were used to contextualize formal student interviews. Together, these data revealed the opportunities and challenges a set of students experienced as they moved to and through community college.

The experiences of participants in this study show that the college pipeline leaks very quickly, with the largest portion of attrition occurring between the first and the second semester of enrollment. Three factors emerged as key explanations for the observed patterns of community college enrollment. The first factor encompasses the institutional features specific to high schools and community college, such as counseling and academic preparation/supports, that may or may not be adequate to the task of moving students forward. The second and third factors—a student’s level of academic preparedness and a student’s familial and life circumstances—are individual factors that can affect the student's performance and the availability of support as she progresses through college. The results of the study indicate that the notion of college preparedness ought to be expanded, given that students’ capacity to respond to challenges in college
were influenced not only by college guidance experienced in high school but also by their social frames of reference.
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I am sincerely thankful to everyone.
I knew I wasn’t ready to go to a four-year college. And so a [junior college] was the next best thing…Transition[s] [are hard] for me…And I think I need stepping stones…I think that a four-year would have a completely different, um, level of education… and I think that, uh, uh, junior college is somewhere in between high school and the four-year… I think it’s that learning in between.

- Alaine

Like when you think of a four-year you think of like going broke. And it’s like I’m not ready for that…I’ll do financial aid but I wouldn’t do like any loans…I choose to go to community college because it's cheaper…I know that [community college] is pretty much like high school…but in a different way. Like it's not as competitive as [the University of California] for some reason…I know that I still need to go to a [junior college] just to condition myself…Maybe the J.C. work isn't as hard as the work at [a university]…I don't know how to put it but I know that it's like if you could do [work at a junior college then] you could do the work [at a university]. That's what I'm saying. I just need to-I know that I can do the work at a J.C….it's like taking steps, you know. I know I'm going to end up in a U.C. but it- this is like a stepping stone.

- Bea

Students often refer to community college as a “stepping stone” to a baccalaureate degree. In this statement, we can infer the speaker’s budding aspirations for a four-year college education. We can also infer from her choice of metaphor that she perceives a wide gap between herself and the aspired-to destination. Whatever her constraints may be, she considers the public two-year college within reach from her current position.

Community college has always been an attractive choice for many from the perspective that it offers access to higher education without the constraints typical of more elite four-year institutions (Cohen and Brawer, 2008). But while its egalitarian mission offers potentially unlimited second chances—especially to the underserved student population—the reality of low attainment rates brings us back to the question of how community colleges both promote and
constrain opportunities for students. This study provides insight into the educational experiences of students who transition directly from high school to public two-year colleges, to illuminate the workings of a postsecondary institution that is a potential key site for the development of baccalaureate aspirations and preparation (Waterman, 2007).

Four broad questions guided this study. They are focused on students’ perspectives of their college choice, their understanding of key educational experiences within the first eighteen months in community college, and their interpretation of their decision to persist or withdraw.

1. What is the college choice process for the community college-bound students?
2. How is college choice a linking variable in the trajectory from high school to community college? Specifically, how might expectations embedded in a student’s college choice mediate initial community college experience and persistence or departure decisions?
3. How do students make sense of their experiences with community college practices and structures within the first eighteen months?
4. How do students interpret their decision to persist or withdraw, particularly in regards to their academic experiences?

This study spanned a twenty month transition period for the community college-bound students sampled. To investigate the guiding questions, a case study approach employing multiple in-depth interviews was used. In the spring semester of 2007, I recruited 40 students from four high schools in two urban school districts in northern California who reported an interest in enrolling in community college after high school graduation. Students were interviewed during the spring semester of their senior year about their community college choice. Subsequent interviews were conducted in the year and half following high school graduation.
My study is situated within three broad areas of scholarship on the transition to postsecondary education. The first area includes studies from the literature on college access. From this literature, I draw out research that helps us understand the key pieces of the college transition process, with an eye towards issues especially relevant for low income and minority students. The second area offers inquiries into specific aspects of the community college experience from the recent community college literature. Finally, theoretical accounts of persistence are re-considered in light of the recent research on community college student experiences. I use the theories proposed in this literature as a starting point for re-framing the conversation about community college choice and participation. The remainder of the chapter sets up a roadmap for the reading the dissertation.

**Context for the Study**

Americans have historically held great faith in schooling for human development and social mobility despite their recurrent critique of the education system (Grubb and Lazerson, 2004). At this point in the twenty-first century, it appears that within the vast American educational system, community college is perceived by the public to be a more important entry point to post-secondary education, more crucial for economic and social mobility for a wider segment of the population. Community colleges are receiving more attention now for a number of reasons. The rising number of students from the baby boom echo generation combined with limited spaces in four-year freshman classes have caused increased competition for freshman slots in four-year colleges (Dougherty and Kienzl, 2006). Moreover, amidst the current fiscal crisis, state-level funding cutbacks in higher education with its consequent rise in tuition at public institutions have led many families to view community colleges as the best financial option for the first two years of college. These factors, along with rising poverty during one of
the worst economic recessions in decades and interest from the private sector and foundations to spur economic growth through labor training (Terriquez, 2012), have pushed community colleges to a central position between the K-12 system and the four-year college system for a larger segment of the population who aspire to a baccalaureate. In this position, community colleges must take on increased responsibility to sort through a larger mass of students and to channel a “qualified” minority on to universities.

**College Access**

The extent to which community colleges can fulfill its promise of equal opportunity is debatable, now perhaps more than ever. Although the two-year public college ideally offers a strategic path to upward mobility open to all (but especially for disadvantaged groups), in reality, only half of community college entrants ever earn enough credits to obtain a certificate or degree or transfer to a four-year college *eight* years after high school graduation (Bailey & Morest, 2006). In their review of college impact studies from the last four decades, Pascarella and Terrenzini (2005) report that though the argument that community colleges preserve existing social inequities may underestimate their contributions to social mobility, in the end, initial attendance at a two-year (vs a four-year) institution reduce the likelihood of bachelor’s degree completion by about 15 to 20 percent (all other factors held constant).

Recent analyses of data drawn from the Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS) 2002-2006 panel show similar patterns (Oseguera, 2012). Two years after high school graduation (assuming a traditional four-year high school trajectory), nearly twenty-eight percent of the 2004 class entered community college, and compared to those who entered four-year institutions, the two-year college students were more likely to be no longer enrolled at that point (29.5% of community college entrants left without credentials within the first two years of enrollment
versus 10.5% of four-year entrants). Low income students were more likely to be enrolled at community college (29.26%) than were middle/high income students (26.51%), and low income students were more likely to leave without credentials within two years (33.2%) compared to middle/high income students (27.1%).

**Definitions of access**

The statistics lead us to consider definitions of college access to better understand the problem. Access can be understood simply as resources that allow entrance into a postsecondary institution. Attributes of the community college exemplifies this definition of access. Local campuses that are distributed across a metropolitan city or suburb to enhance convenient reach for students is one form of such college access. Another is the college’s “open door” policy. Prospective students can simply walk inside an admissions office and stay long enough to provide basic information to obtain enrollment. These forms of college access differ from access defined in terms of academic progress rather than simply entry.

Adelman (2007) maintains that threshold access (a.k.a. “walking through the door”) is only one of three major thresholds for students’ postsecondary advancement—the other two are establishing sufficient credits to lead to credential (“persistence” or “participation”) and completion (“success”) of that credential. In fact, he argues that Americans do not have an access problem if we go by the definition of access as threshold access. NELS:88/2000 data show that among traditional age youths (18-26), the college access rate is seventy-nine percent. In other words, nearly four out of five enter some kind of postsecondary institution by their mid-twenties.

**Locating the Barriers to Access**

Disparity in threshold access can be seen to some degree along racial lines, but the greatest difference among traditional-age students lies between on-time high school graduates
from the top third of family income range and those from the bottom third of family income (91% as opposed to 69% entered a postsecondary institution by age twenty-six, respectively). If threshold access is considered a problem, then low income youths constitute the crux of the story.

And yet, the problem is less of a threshold access problem and more of a participation problem. Adelman (2007) argues that the nature of the problem for both students who decide not to enroll in postsecondary education after high school (those who do not reach the first threshold of “walking through the door”) and those who enroll but eventually leave without a credential (those who do not reach the second threshold of “persistence”) is academic. He points to data from university systems that waive tuition and fees (those in Minnesota, Georgia, and Texas) to show that the effect of the financial aid policy on student enrollment is quite modest. To gauge the academic nature of postsecondary participation, Adelman employed the ten unit completion as a measure of participation and finds that the 79 percent of high school graduates who walked through the door of postsecondary education becomes 70 percent of high school graduates who actually participated by age twenty-six. The race/ethnicity gap grows from 6-8 percent to 12-14 percent and the proportion of low income students who persist towards a degree drops from 69 to 54 percent. The indicators suggest that patterns of first-year performance are more important for eventual college completion than retention into the second year of college.

Though Adelman’s argument puts academic preparation at the center of college preparedness, within the secondary school administration literature its definition encompasses two other components—college knowledge and behavioral repertoires. In this literature, college knowledge refers to knowledge about requirements for various college systems (in California the systems are the community colleges, the California State Universities, and the University of
California), the standardized tests used for admission (e.g., SAT and ACT), the college
application process, the financial aid process, and other related processes (Conley, 2010).
Behavioral repertoires refer to behaviors that support academic success such as study habits,
organizational skills, planning, time management, and active engagement.

**Influence of high schools on college enrollment**

The components of college preparedness are supported by a high school’s organizational
characteristics. Schools that matter for college transitions operate through two dimensions of
school structure—the formal structure (e.g., guidance resources and curriculum) and
organizational norms that communicate values and establishes practices that are related to
college going (Alexander & Eckland, 1977; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; McDonough, 1997).
Using data from the High Schools Effectiveness Study, Hill (2008) identified three distinctive
college-linking strategies schools use, and that these strategies are associated with variation in
college enrollment. In particular, the resource clearinghouse strategy, in which organizational
norms limit schools’ role as agents in the college-linking process, fosters significant racial/ethnic
variation in students’ outcomes. For example, Latino students in schools with good resource
structures and limited commitment to facilitating equitable access to resources are much more
likely to forego college than to enroll in a public two-year college. At the same time, the resource
clearinghouse strategy fosters significant positive effect for four-year college enrollment (versus
two-year college) among both Black and Latino students. Hill did not, however, find any
significant effects for the interactions between SES indicators and the school strategies.

The results of Hill’s study imply that schools influence the first type of college access
(threshold access) through its guidance resources and strategy (e.g., whether schools act as
brokers in the college linking process) and the second type of access (“participation”) through its
In other words, how far along a student gets in college (i.e., how many credits she earns) is partly a result of her prior academic preparation, as reflected in the requirements fulfilled in high school and skills gained from those offerings. While the role of academics in the transition to college is intuitive, her findings on school effects on threshold access is more interesting since less is known about how certain guidance strategies direct students in particular postsecondary paths (four-year college, two-year college or no college).

Influence of family background on college enrollment

We have long known that family background exerts great influence on student outcomes, including college enrollment (Coleman et al, 1966; Hearn, 1991; Carnevale and Rose, 2004; National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). While racial and gender inequities have narrowed since the 1970s, it appears that the relationship between being from a lower socioeconomic background and being located lower in the higher education hierarchy has become stronger (Karen, 1991). We see this increasing stratification because as more students complete high school than ever before, the college eligibility pool expands. Students who could not have entered college years before now do so since the tremendous expansion of community colleges.

Lower SES students who are the first in their family to attend college are distinct from other students whose parents had completed college. Students who are first-generation begin to think about going to college at a much later stage compared to students whose parents had completed college, and those thoughts tend to be triggered by school personnel (Litten, 1982; McDonough, 1997). First-generation students also do not get the quality and breadth of college preparation information as do higher SES students, oftentimes are not taking the right courses, and struggle to reconcile their college-oriented world with their families and communities. Karen
(1991) has found that first-generation college students are more concentrated in community colleges since the mid 1970s.

**Finance and college enrollment**

Researchers have also looked at how financial aid affects college enrollment. What we know about the effects of tuition, grants, and loans comes largely from research on four-year college data, however, and may have limited applicability to community college students. B. Long (2004a) finds that although tuition price was an important determinant of attendance for the class of 1972, college costs do not explain differences in enrollment for the class of 1992. At the same time, Kane (2003) analyzed the Cal Grant program\(^1\), and finds that grant eligibility had large impacts (3 to 4 percentage points) on college enrollment among applicants, with larger impacts on the choice of private colleges in California. Singell and Stone’s (2002) findings suggest that merit-based aid increased enrollment for all students, but financially-stable students respond disproportionately, even when academic achievement is held constant. These findings indicate that students’ interpretation of and application for grant and merit-based aid are affected by resources tied to their socioeconomic status. Beyond tuition price and grants, forms of aid such as loans can also affect attendance. Dynarski (2003b) examined variation in loan eligibility after the Higher Education Amendments of 1992, which removed home equity from the set of assets taxed by the federal financial aid formula. She concludes that loan eligibility had a positive effect on college attendance. Whether the finding from the four-year context extends to community college students is uncertain. B. Long (2007) maintains that more work is needed to understand the effect of loan availability on college attendance.

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\(^1\) To meet eligibility for Cal Grant, students must demonstrate meeting the criteria of income, assets and high school GPA.
In regards to individual perception of college financing, Grubb (2008) notes that many students and families over-estimate the costs of college and their knowledge of financial aid—the process of applying for aid and applications to lenders in the case of loans—is limited. Moreover, financial aid offices that provide help in this process are especially variable in community colleges. These two factors together work to explain why eligible students are less likely to apply for and receive aid in community colleges than in other institutions. In the California context, the value of state-provided Cal Grants has declined relative to the cost of living, so their role in helping community college students cover living expenses has weakened.

*The college transition process*

The process of adapting to a foreign environment itself poses obstacles to successful completion. Youths transitioning to a new institution, especially those who had been at the margins of school culture, need to make sense of their new college environment—they must navigate and learn the logic of its institutional structures and practices. As noted earlier, analyses of college participation shows that patterns of first-year academic performance are more important for eventual college completion than retention into the second year of college (Adelman, 2006). This finding suggests that non-academic experiences that support academic performance within the first year may also play a critical role in students’ decision to persist towards in community college.

More recently, researchers have begun to examine the relationship between organizational characteristics of community college and student outcomes. As Judith Scott-Clayton (2011) observes, “For many community college students, finding a path to degree completion is the equivalent of navigating a river on a dark night.” Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person (2006), using ethnographic and institutional level data, compared the organizational
procedures of public and private two-year colleges and concluded that the highly structured pathways private two-year colleges employ result in less confusion for their students and higher completion rates. Organizational norms and practices, however, make up only one aspect of the unstructured community college environment. The social environment of the two-year campus constitutes another. Since opportunities for sustained relationships appear to exist primarily in classroom spaces, the academic environment strongly influences what sorts of auxiliary supports students obtain. Karp, Hughes, and O’Gara (2008) found that community colleges students tend to take an instrumental approach to college peer relationships—utilizing classmates as a source of information or academic support—rather than a social one, partly due to the nature of the commuter environment of community colleges.

If we take that the public two-year context offers relatively few sign posts for students, then it is important to ask how students make sense of their college environment and what they experience as key challenges to persistence towards completion. The extant literature on community college students has very recently grown so that we now have a better understanding of what students perceive as significant institutional experiences. Nodine et al (2012) is a cross-state (Florida, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas) study that employed focus group interviews with current and past community college students. They identified three areas of concern for students: connecting to information and supports, connecting to instructional services, and connecting to career exploration. Some of the key issues within these three areas include students’ lack of knowledge about community college practices (and they often don’t know what questions to ask until it was too late), students’ perception that their colleges are not proactive in reaching out to students and that their colleges’ modes of information dissemination are outdated, students’ limited experiences with accelerated developmental (remedial) education,
and students’ need for opportunities to both explore career options and enter into a structured program of study more quickly. These findings are supported to an extent by the RP Group’s research on California community college students. Reporting on first year findings from their on-going three year study, Booth et al (2013) identified several key themes from phone surveys and focus groups with current and past students. The first is that students perceive that colleges need to foster students’ motivation. Though students come in with the intention of obtaining a college degree, they need help with this drive and support in maintaining focus and direction. Second, colleges need to teach students how to succeed in the postsecondary environment. These two findings parallel Nodine et al (2012)’s conclusion that incoming students’ knowledge of community college practices is very limited, which may contribute to their loss of focus along the way despite initial intentions. Third, colleges need to structure support around factors identified as important—direction, focus, engagement, nurture, and connection. And finally, all college representatives play a role in supporting student achievement, but faculty are perceived as having the greatest potential impact on students’ educational journeys.

Together, the findings from the emergent student voice literature converge with the research on the organizational environment of two-year colleges to show us that community college is an institution with its own practices, processes, conventions, and demands. The factors identified as important by students suggest that community colleges need to do more to help students find direction in the community college space. Student reports suggest that the areas that are especially important for developing student engagement, focus, and connection to the college lie in organizational units that support effective information dissemination and guidance, academic pathways and classroom practices, and specialized support for the large number nontraditional students these colleges serve.
We are only just beginning to understand the kinds of guidance and informational supports that are experienced as relevant to community college students, the academic challenges that the community college environment pose, and the academic and social needs of the population interacting with this institution. To locate some structure and explanatory coherence to the developing community college research, I now turn to theories on persistence from the wider higher education literature.

**Theories of persistence and current interventions**

From the higher education literature dominated by a focus on four-year institutions, we find various theoretical models to explain college persistence, ranging from individual background characteristics such as motivation and academic engagement to institutional characteristics such as student-faculty contact (Bean & Kuh, 1984). To date, the most widely cited theory that explains the college persistence process is Tinto’s Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1975), which posits that attrition or persistence results from interactions between a student and his or her educational environment during the student’s stay in a higher education institution. The theory hypothesizes that persistence is more likely to occur if an individual’s motivation and academic ability matches an institution’s academic and social characteristics (other factors held equal). If this match is strong, students are more likely to participate in the social and academic life of the institution. Integration, then, has two dimensions, academic and social. Integration shapes two underlying individual commitments: a commitment to completing college and a commitment to his or her institution.

The application of Tinto’s (1975) integration framework to community colleges, however, is problematic. While the role of academic ability in a college student’s experience of success is expected, the theory posits that it is the *match* between the student’s academic ability
and the college’s academic characteristics that explains persistence. Behind this theory is the four-year college model, where student populations are more homogenous. Among four-year institutions, it is common to find a defined academic range within which students fall. Top tier research universities, for instance, admit only students who can provide evidence of a minimum level of academic achievement. The public two-year college, on the other hand, serves a very diverse student body as a result of their open door policy. To say that there should be a match between the student’s academic ability and the college’s academic standards, then, ignores the fact that the academic range at community college is very wide—a result of the college’s stated mission to serve community needs (which stands in contrast to selective colleges’ filtering role). Furthermore, a problematic assumption underlying the match theory is that the academic practices in place in community colleges are fine, that their processes adequately meet the needs of their students.

The developments in remedial education currently underway across the nation suggest that the academic obstacles community college students experience is less about the mismatch between the skills students bring with them and the college’s academic standard. Rather, institutional policies, processes, and practices regarding assessments (how colleges determine students’ abilities in the areas of math and English), curriculum (what students are taught), and treatment (coursework, tutoring or other support) contribute in a significant way to students’ loss of momentum. Specifically, researchers have found that students referred to lower levels of developmental/remedial education were unlikely to complete the sequence (Roksa et al, 2009). Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2009) estimate that only about 10 percent of students referred to the third level will ever get through remediation and pass a college-level math course. The sources driving this attrition process within developmental education (which a majority of community
college students have experience with) are multiple. In part, assessments are not reliably predictive, typically explaining less than 10 percent of the variation in student success in the first college-level English and math (Hughes and Scott-Clayton, 2011). Developmental curriculum, moreover, is not always aligned with what students need to know to succeed in college-level courses (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Grubb (2012) finds that teaching methods in developmental courses often rely on remedial pedagogy—emphasis on low level drill and practice rather than conceptual understanding and application to a variety of contexts.

In addition to academic integration, the other key component of Tinto’s framework is social integration, which is applicable to four-year residential campuses where students have the resources to devote much of their time to study and live away from home in a defined college community. Community college students, in contrast, often must work, live off campus, and/or manage familial obligations that prevent them from participating in activities that would integrate them further into college life. Karp, Hughes, and O’Gara’s (2008) finding that community colleges students tend to take an instrumental approach (as opposed to a social one) to college peer relationships point to the pull of outside commitments and lack of social structure within the community college campus. An important question that arises from this research is, do two-year college students need the type of social integration four-year residential students value in their journey towards college completion?

Current research on community college student experiences challenges us to revise the concept of social integration for two-year college students. Students’ feelings of disconnect from their college and their need for on-going, consistent advising—especially in the area of connecting their education with career options (Nodine et al, 2012)—suggest that community college students do need to be socially integrated with their college, but not in the moral sense as
theorized by Tinto. Their social support needs are more practical in nature. It might be the case that the challenges posed by the community college environment (in the forms of organizational policies, procedures, and curricular practices) make it so that students need more support to maintain their motivation, focus, and engagement.

This study contributes to the literature on the transition to college in several ways. First, it provides a longitudinal picture of the process of transitioning from high school to community college. The student perspective of community college choice was documented to identify potential links between high school experiences and community college persistence. For instance, expectations embedded in college choice may have an influence on subsequent persistence. Second, students’ experiences of community college services and environment were recorded over eighteen months, allowing a coherent and nuanced story that connects varied experiences. Third, the study makes a comparison of leavers and persisters’ perspectives of the challenges of navigating the community college environment and identifies their responses to those challenges. Thus, student motivation and agency are accounted for in the college persistence narrative. In these ways, I hope to provide additional evidence to the growing literature on the community college student experience by extending our understanding of what students perceive as key first-year experiences (which research has shown to be crucial for college completion), how they interpret and respond to their challenges, and what they say about their decision-making around persistence.

**Research Design**

At the start of this project, my intention was to do a longitudinal study of recent high school graduates’ experiences transitioning into community college. Though there was growing interest in college transition issues at that point, little research had been done on the community
college transition process itself, from the student vantage point. Therefore, qualitative research—a strategy for exploring a new area and developing hypotheses—appeared to be appropriate for my research questions. I wanted to investigate the transition process by focusing on students’ lived experiences within the two-year institution and collecting data over a sustained period of time to go beyond quick snapshots of “what” and “how many” information. The case study approach employing multiple in-depth interviews over time offered an avenue to obtain rich data, the sort of data that might afford me the opportunity to assess causal relationships. Further, interviewing students as they engage in the activities of interest provided data grounded in both local context and the meanings people attach to actions, events, and processes in their lives. At a fundamental level, it is people’s interpretation of their experiences and behavior that is most important in the study of college student behavior.

In the first phase of research, in-depth interviews had been conducted with 40 students in order to investigate the processes involved in the transition to college for community college-bound youths. The college choice making process was the focus of the first set of interviews. In the second phase of research, follow up interviews sought to understand students’ college experiences. Specifically, how did participants understand the relationships between their college and non-college experiences, on the one hand, and their interactions with their respective college and persistence behavior on the other? These last two rounds of interviews focused particularly on students’ perception of key institutional experiences within the first three semesters of college. Additional information from informal communication with participants between interviews and interviews with key administrators and staff at one community college district (where the majority of study participants ultimately enrolled in) were also used to contextualize formal student interviews. However, since the administrator/staff data had been obtained in a
separate research project I had been involved in (between 2007-2009), this information is kept in the background in chapter analyses. As Yin (2003) notes, the advantage of studying more than one source is to triangulate data. This study design is longitudinal and employs multiple sources of data to answer the following questions: 1) How does a high school senior make the decision to go to a community college and what are her global college plans?, and 2) How do students make sense of their interactions with their college and decision making regarding persistence? This qualitative design can potentially capture the longitudinal process and evolving nature of college goals, planning and persistence.

**Sampling**

Forty students initially participated in this study. Multiple methods were employed to recruit students for this research project, including printed advertisements, presentations made in classrooms and counseling sessions geared towards community college prospective students, and the snowball method. Students were not chosen randomly for this study because the high schools did not have access to students’ college plans. Instead, students were chosen primarily by their intention to enroll in a community college and their willingness to participate in the research project. In total, 21 males and 19 females voluntarily participated. 20 students reported themselves as African American; 9 reported as Asians (5 Chinese, 1 Filipino, 1 Cambodian, 1 Laotian, and 1 Vietnamese); 9 reported as Latino (6 are of Mexican descent, 1 from Peru, 1 from Honduras, and 1 from Guatemala); and 2 reported mixed ancestry. African American students are natives, while nearly half of the immigrant students are first generation. The generational status of Latino students were complicated by residency status. Five of the students were undocumented and among these two were second generation².

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² That is, two came to the U.S. as toddlers.
These students were recruited from four secondary schools in the San Francisco Bay Area that were on the list of top ten feeder schools to a local community college district in the spring of 2008. The four schools varied in terms of organizational structure, demographics, and academic achievement. Two of the four high schools, Washington and Lincoln\(^3\), were part of one administration at the start of this study. Most students attended the large comprehensive school on the main campus, while a small minority (students who did not do well in the large school) went to the continuation school at a different location. Of the four schools, Washington demonstrated the highest academic achievement and its racial and class composition was mixed. It also had the largest enrollment (over 3100 students in 2007-08). The third school, Roosevelt High, was also a large comprehensive school (1875 students in 2007-2008). It was primarily low-income (76\%) and “majority-minority” with Asians being the largest group (62\%). About a quarter of the student body was English Language Learners. The fourth secondary school, Wilson High, had a much smaller student population (316 in 2007-08) since it was only one among a community of three small schools located on a single campus. Like Roosevelt, Wilson was also a “majority-minority” school—with African-Americans being the largest group (59\%) and Latinos the next largest (35\%)—and was primarily low-income (64\%). Over a fifth of their students were English Language Learners (21\%).

Beyond organizational structure and student demographics, I was interested in the college-linking strategies high schools used. The two large comprehensive schools, Roosevelt and Washington, were similar in that they both employed a norm of low intensity advising. Neither school assumed the role of being “intrusive” agents in the college-linking process. They differed, however, in level of college guidance resources. Roosevelt was a low resource school

\(^3\) Pseudonyms are used throughout.
while Washington had a solid/good level of resources to guide students through the transition to college. Both the continuation school and the small school were labeled as small school environments in this study because their school conditions allowed students the sort of college guidance available through closer student-teacher/staff relationships. Lincoln, the continuation school, had access to solid college resources (partly through their link to Washington), and used intensive advising to link their students to community college. Wilson, too, had a solid level of college resources, and used intrusive advising to link students to college, though they emphasized four-year institutions as a college option. Table 1.1 outlines the characteristics of the high schools participants attended and the number of participating students from each school.

Table 1.1 Characteristics of schools participants attended

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School environment</th>
<th>Student demographics</th>
<th>Academic achievement</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roosevelt Comprehensive school</td>
<td>“Majority-minority” &amp; majority low income</td>
<td>Below the state average</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Comprehensive school</td>
<td>Mixed (race and ses) student body</td>
<td>Higher than the state average</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln Small school</td>
<td>“Majority-minority”</td>
<td>Below the state average</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson Small school</td>
<td>“Majority-minority” &amp; majority low income</td>
<td>Below the state average</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though not every student in each school had an equal chance of being selected for the study (students’ college plans were not known to school personnel and there was not a cost efficient way to identify the entire population interested in enrolling in community college), the

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4 Academic achievement is a term used to indicate the academic preparation of the student body as a whole. The published API score (range was from a low of 1 to a high of 7 among the four schools) was used. Additional data such as graduation rates, SAT and AP exam participation rate, percentage completing UC or CSU requirements, and number of students attending UC were also used if available. Washington was the only school among the four that performed fairly well on all these measures. In 2007-08, it published an API score of 7 while Roosevelt and Wilson each had an API score of 1.
students who ultimately signed up to join this study reflected to some extent their school. For example, the greatest number of participants came from Washington, the largest school. Washington students, also, were mixed in terms of racial and socioeconomic background and tended towards stronger academic preparation. Participants from Wilson and Lincoln, on the other hand, were nearly all low income and African American, and mostly academically underprepared.

**Data Collection**

Data collected during Phase I and II include multiple interviews with each participating student. The first round of interviews took place at the schools the students attended, in the spring of 2007. The data was recorded and transcribed for analysis, and consisted of one (approximately) 60 minute semi-structured interview per student. The interviews focused on students’ college aspirations, expectations, and plans, educational experiences and attainment of close family members, processes they engaged in and various types of support they received at home and at school in exploring college options. Students were also asked about the nature of college counseling they received in high school, their financial circumstances, college plans of friends, and how they narrowed their college options. They were asked to describe their perceptions of community colleges, what they expect life as a community college student would entail, and any worries or hopes they had about their transition to college and adulthood. Table 1.2 lists the students who participated in the study and first round of interviews by school.
Table 1.2 Students participants by high school origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Washington High</th>
<th>Lincoln High</th>
<th>Roosevelt High</th>
<th>Wilson High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. May</td>
<td></td>
<td>5. Xia</td>
<td>5. Connie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Art</td>
<td></td>
<td>8. Tavis</td>
<td>8. Ellen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Jordan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Lisa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Bea</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Kam</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the second and third rounds of interviews, a similar process of data collection took place. During the fall of 2007 (between September and December of 2007), follow up calls were made to all the students who volunteered to participate in the spring, with the exceptions of Bea, Jenn, and Niki (students who were “lost”). The second and third interviews focused on students’ decisions to follow through (or not) with postsecondary plans made in high school, whether their prior expectations of community college had been met thus far, enrollment experiences, academic experiences, opportunities and challenges met, institutional and personal supports obtained or needed during college attendance, and future plans. Table 1.3 shows the patterns of community college enrollment and participation in this study up to the end of fall 2007. The total number of participants is listed as forty (the number of students who originally joined). By the summer of 2007, thirty-six of the forty had reported graduating and passing their CAHSEE (California High School Exit Exam). In total, twenty-seven enrolled in community college, and

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5 A second student researcher who worked on this study had lost their contact information during data collection.
of those, one withdrew during the fall\textsuperscript{6}. Six reported delaying enrollment (for one or two terms) and four decided not to enroll. Three were lost due to researcher error.

\begin{table}
\centering
\caption{Enrollment behavior of participants by end of Fall 2007}
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|}
\hline
Participants & Summer 2007 & Fall 2007 \\
\hline
\text{N = 40} & & \\
\hline
Graduated high school & 36 & \\
\hline
Never enrolled & & 4 \\
\hline
Enrolled in CC & & 27 \\
\hline
Delayed enrollment & & 6 \\
\hline
Attrition from study & & 3 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

Thirty-four participated in the second round of interviews, including the six who delayed enrollment and two who decided not to enroll after all. Interview questions for those who did not enroll in the fall differed from those applied to enrolled students, focusing instead on the events and decision-making that contributed to changed postsecondary plans. Of the twenty-seven who enrolled in community college in the fall, only twenty-six participated in full interviews (nearly all of which were conducted between September and December of 2007\textsuperscript{7}). One student, Jim, only spoke with me over the phone at the end of fall semester, confirming his enrollment\textsuperscript{8}.

By the third round of interviews, conducted in the fall semester of 2008 (between August and December of 2008), the total number of participants from the original sample of forty who enrolled in community college at some point during the 2007-08 academic year had grown from

\textsuperscript{6} This student (Kylie) could not finish her academic/course requirements in the fall so she withdrew and re-enrolled again the following spring term.
\textsuperscript{7} Connie and Art are the exceptions. Connie’s second interview was conducted in August of 2008 when she moved back to the Bay Area. Art’s was conducted in March of 2008.
\textsuperscript{8} I pieced together information about this student’s community college enrollment from the phone conversation and a conversation with his friend Wayne, another participant in this study. Jim did not do a full second interview due to trouble with the law in the early spring of 2008.
twenty-seven to thirty-one. In addition, one student, Connie, reported enrolling for the fall semester of 2008, but since she did not participate in a third interview, her academic experiences in community college could not be confirmed. Table 1.4, however, includes Connie in the number of participants who ended up enrolling in community college at some point within the duration of this study (thus n = 32).

Table 1.4 Enrollment behavior of participants at two points—Fall 2007 and Fall 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Summer 2007</th>
<th>Fall 2007</th>
<th>Fall 2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N = 40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never enrolled</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in CC</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed enrollment</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attrition from study</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown above, by the third round of interviews, thirty-six out of the original forty students were accounted for during the 2007-08 academic year. Four youths are listed in the attrition box in Table 1.4, but in reality, more than four were lost by the end of fall 2008. Though Tables 1.3 and 1.4 give a clear picture of participants’ community college enrollment behavior over two points in time during Phase II of this study, to provide greater detail for both students’ enrollment behavior and participation in this study, I outline the proportion of students who participated in full interviews at three points in Table 1.5, the proportion of participants who engaged in college at four points in time in Table 1.6, and the individual students who engaged in leaving and persistence in the contexts of college and this study in Table 1.7.
Table 1.5 Proportion of students who participated in interviews at three points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview 1</th>
<th>Interview 2</th>
<th>Interview 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(spring 2007)</td>
<td>(fall 2007)</td>
<td>(fall 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 100%            | 85%             | 67.5%           

Table 1.5 shows that one hundred percent (40 out of 40) of students participated in the first round of interviews conducted in the spring semester of their senior year of high school. By the end of the following fall semester, twenty-seven students enrolled in community college, six delayed enrollment, and four decided not to enroll in college. In all, 34 youths (85% of original cohort) participated in interview two (26 who enrolled, 6 who delayed enrollment, and 2 who decided not to enroll). Finally, by the end of fall 2008, 27 youths (67.5% of original cohort) participated in interview three. The three students (Bea, Niki, and Jenn) who were lost (due to researcher error) soon after interview one, the four students who decided not to continue participating in this study (they did not respond to my phone calls and emails) after interview two, and the four students who decided not to enroll in college at all (and thus were ineligible for interview three) were not part of the third round of interviews. In addition, two students, Jim (an early leaver) and Connie (who delayed enrollment) did not do interview three.
Table 1.6 Proportion of students who enrolled in & withdrew from community college

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Fall ’07</th>
<th>Spring ‘08</th>
<th>Summer ‘08</th>
<th>Fall ‘08</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N = 40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in CC</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumulative # who had enrolled</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion who withdrew</td>
<td>1/27</td>
<td>7/29</td>
<td>12/30</td>
<td>11/32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.7%)</td>
<td>(24.1%)</td>
<td>(40%)</td>
<td>(34.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.6 shows that while the number of participants who did follow through with postsecondary plans made in high school is fairly high (32 or 80% of the original cohort), along the way quite a few students were “lost.” The second column indicates that twenty-seven participants enrolled in community college in the fall of 2007 and within that group one withdrew late in the term (only to re-enroll again the following spring). Thus, 3.7% of that group engaged in leave-taking in the first term. The third column shows that by spring of 2008, twenty-nine participants had enrolled. But during that time, seven had also left the college track. This seven includes 5 early leavers (who left before spring semester and did not return to the system during this study) and 2 late leavers (who reported withdrawing in early spring and did not return to the system during this study). The fourth column indicates that by the summer of 2008, 30 of the original 40 participants had enrolled in community college within the 2007-08 academic year. 12 participants had also reported having withdrawn at that time. This group includes 7 late leavers and 5 early leavers. The fifth column indicates that 2 more from the original 40 enrolled in community college by the fall of 2008 (n = 32) and one among the 12 who disengaged earlier re-enrolled in the fall (n =11). While these numbers suggest that a large portion of enrollees
leave the system at some point, they do not include the students who decided not to continue with this study ($n = 4^9$) and those who decided not to enter community college after all ($n = 4$). (Such inclusion would inflate the number further.) Table 1.7 lists the students by participation behavior. Note that the asterisks by Kylie and Jarvis denote that they stopped out briefly and re-enrolled. Tim and Connie are treated in chapter five within the discussion of persisters, but in actuality their persistence beyond one term of enrollment could not be verified since both delayed enrollment and entered community college at the tail end of this study.

Table 1.7 Students categorized by participation behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-entrants (n = 4)</th>
<th>Attrition (n = 7)</th>
<th>Early leavers (n = 6)</th>
<th>Late leavers (n = 7)</th>
<th>Persisters (n = 14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

9 Ellen and Netta did not respond to phone calls I made by spring of 2008 and did not confirm their enrollment for spring of 2008. Sharon and Desiree may have enrolled in spring of 2008 (we spoke over the phone) but did not participate in interview three.
The wealth of data gathered informed my analysis of student participants’ experiences transitioning to community college, presented in the following four chapters. The analysis shows that the college transition concept ought to be expanded beyond the processes typically occurring in the last year of high school to also include at minimum first college semester experiences. Such a conceptual expansion would facilitate revision of school and college practices to increase student support and improve college outcomes.

**Overview of the Manuscript**

Chapter two explores the ways students’ college orientation and preparative behavior may be affected by the social environments outside of high school. Embedded in students’ discussions is evidence that the social contexts of students’ lives play a significant role in shaping what they consider and anticipate during the college choice process. The frames of reference students used in their community college choice include immigrant narratives and the achievements of adult figures they affiliate themselves with. Low income African American participants, specifically, used family members and the neighborhood modal adult as their reference group in the process of college search. Within the cohort of forty students, two groups of students were identified—those who were confident in their college outlook and those who were fearful of potential negative college outcomes. How students frame their community college choice relates to the specific strategies they consider employing in their preparation for college.

While chapter two explores the social contexts of participants’ college choice, chapter three examines choice within four school contexts. While school size and guidance approach (as experienced by students) varied among the four participating schools, what was common to all and what proved consequential for participants is the very limited guidance specific to
community college. Students experienced guidance within the small school environments as a high intensity, multi-target approach, which was viewed as effective in expanding the set of alternatives they considered; the guidance in comprehensive high schools was experienced as a low-intensity, generic information-centered college guidance approach that wasn’t especially helpful. Students who attended the comprehensive schools, consequently, tended to rely primarily on their background knowledge, college norms among people they know, and personal relationships rather than institutional sources in their college decision-making process. What is common with both types of school organizations, however, is that students only learned obvious and generic information about community colleges, such as their transfer role in the California college system, rather than deep structure knowledge. Students were not prepared by any high school for important tasks they must undertake early in college, such as choosing courses, developing an education plan, preparing for assessments, and navigating the curricular structure of transfer-track undergraduate education. Moreover, students do not learn about the institutional conditions specific to community colleges; they therefore cannot prepare for such conditions by develop the social support structures essential to success.

Chapter four examines three structural features of community college—assessment (or placement), academic counseling, and the commuter campus environment. For students, remedial or transfer-level placement and education planning are critical factors in the process of moving towards transfer to a four-year institution. What was common among participants in this study, however, was their limited understanding of how to construct an education plan for their undergraduate study and their not knowing about assessments before enrolling. Exacerbating the outcomes of students’ limited knowledge are the inadequate assessment processes, limited support for course planning, and lack of incentive for utilizing advising over time at the
community college district most attended. Peers were a source of support for college tasks, in addition to formal college resources; yet, participants in this study found that the commuter campus, with its distinct social environment, offered limited points of access to informational pathways, which, in turn, significantly influenced their learning how to function in college—in other words, to undertake critical tasks such as obtaining informational, social and academic support.

Chapter five maps participants’ progress in community college over a period of eighteen months. The experiences of participants in this study show that the college pipeline leaks very quickly, with the largest portion of attrition occurring between the first and the second semester of enrollment. Access to academic mastery appears to be a big part of students’ decision to continue participation in college. Both leavers and persisters experienced academic challenges, but the former were much more likely to be placed in remediation and struggled with “boring” classes. A comparison of leavers and persisters’ responses to their college conditions shows that, generally, late leavers minimized their college-related stressors by disengaging from college and taking alternative routes that offered a higher chance of success. Persisters, on the other hand, engaged in more help-seeking behavior, despite the difficulties the community college environment posed. They may have been more likely to do so because persisters, as a group, were better positioned coming into college to handle academic challenges. They were also better positioned in that they had stable personal infrastructure, unlike half of all the leavers. The question of why leavers were less likely to seek help for their academics may be resolved when student narratives about their prior academic experiences and their reference group’s achievements in life (documented in chapter two) are examined. When students’ outlooks (optimistic or pessimistic) are mapped against their college persistence behavior, it turns out that
most optimists persisted while nearly all pessimists either never enrolled, withdrew, or were “lost” (i.e., no longer participated) halfway through the study. Thus, students’ attribution of their academic difficulties, along with other college challenges, may have played a role in their choice not to seek academic help and their decision to turn to full-time work or engage with alternative training programs.
Identity as frame of reference for college choice

Going to college is generally thought of as normal, part of the young adult’s choice set as she looks forward to moving from one life stage to another, on the road to self-actualization and independence. The normalcy of college attendance, as observed by researchers, is reflected in the number of students who now attend college\(^1\) and the way youths discuss college (e.g., Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). These patterns make it easy to overlook the stratification of opportunity in college access. Limited transfer rates between two- and four-year institutions, as well as the number of youths who never enroll in any form of postsecondary education, are further indicators of stratification. The concurrent existence of educational opportunity\(^2\) and unfulfilled aspirations produces an interesting and complex picture of social mobility in the American context.

This chapter focuses on one section of the pipeline to college—the decision-making a student engages in that leads to college enrollment. Decision-making about college is usually prompted when a student reaches a certain juncture in high school and finds herself anticipating what opportunities may lie ahead. At what point in time thoughts about college are triggered depends on the student’s social and school (organizational) environments. Here, student

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\(^1\) Since 1965, enrollment at 4-year colleges has doubled whereas enrollment at 2-year colleges increased five-fold (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). While enrollment at 2-year colleges constituted slightly more than one third of 4-year college enrollment in 1970, now it makes up nearly half of all college enrollments (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003).

\(^2\) Postsecondary access has increased due to the flourishing of varied postsecondary institutions in the past century, including community colleges, private vocational colleges, and online universities such as the University of Phoenix.
discussions of the value of college, and their choice for community college in particular, are examined in relation to the social environment of the student, defined broadly as the spheres of social life outside of school. From a phenomenological viewpoint, decision-making is behavior understood only relative to a specific frame of reference. A key goal of this chapter is to make explicit the subjective and relative character of decision-making in the comparative analysis of sub-samples of the research participants. In focusing on students’ perceived social environments, I assume that identity, formed through particular social experiences, is an important frame of reference for college choice. That is, thoughts about college, and the subsequent decisions regarding preparation and enrollment, are thought to be triggered by some mechanism(s) in the social environment, that are themselves related back to the self.

Holland and colleagues (1998) maintain that “identities are lived in and through activity and so must be conceptualized as they develop in social practice” (5). In this view, identity is a social product, fashioned by a person, in the process of activity within social situations, from cultural resources. Thus people embody past histories and are subject to present discourses and images, yet their capacity to envision and create new ways of being, in a process of continuous re-fashioning, allows a measure of self-direction. In the context of college decision-making, I posit that where people are located along the axes of social structure (class, gender, race, nationality) produces distinct resources and needs that will differentially influence their thinking about postsecondary education. The parts of people’s identities that are embedded in their past and present conditions, however, are also the bases from which they create new ways of being, new activities, new narratives of themselves.

To clarify the philosophical approach taken in this study, I briefly examine the theoretical model commonly used to interpret student decision making about college—the college choice
model (e.g., Hossler et al, 1999). This theory attempts to explain how students make their choice for college by conceptualizing the decision making process as a three phase process—predisposition, search, and choice. The assumptions underlying this model are closely aligned with the principles of rationality. Pure rationality presumes that decision-makers share a basic set of preferences, that alternatives and their consequences are defined by the environment, and that decision-makers have perfect knowledge of those alternatives and their outcomes. The model’s assumptions of pure rationality are reflected in the way decision makers and their environments are conceptualized: In the predisposition phase, the student’s value-based orientation towards postsecondary education are formed (through family, peers, school), which then stimulates a search for institutional matches according to her preference, and finally a choice that maximizes the fit between the institution and the student’s personal preferences. From this perspective, motivations are the same across decision makers. Students all aspire to gain entry into the best college they can get in, they are all motivated to search in a systematic manner (utilizing all relevant resources) to reach their objective, and they seek to maximize their own interests. The second assumption reflected in the model is the notion of objective reality. In the portrayal of the decision-maker’s freedom to recognize and match a given institution’s characteristics to her preferences, the model suggests that objective opportunities (or, alternatives) are made evident within the environment. In other words, perception of those objects in the environment is identical across individuals. Perception, then, is not treated as an activity involving social construction of the environment; rather it is conceived as a cognitive computation of what actually exists in the physical world. The third assumption is decisions are driven by perfect knowledge—both of alternatives and the self. The idea of maximizing the fit between the decision
maker and the postsecondary institution is dependent on knowledge of relevant institutions and personal preferences.

Finally, it is important to note the uncritical perspective of the college choice model. Even though the social environment of the decision maker is acknowledged in one of the three phases, the individual is the unit of analysis and the individual’s aspirations or values is what determines the search activity, not environmental structures. Moreover, while values are acknowledged to be shaped by social factors, those factors are limited to the student’s immediate community—parents, older sibling, peers, and school agents. What can be inferred, then, is that the value for college is heavily influenced by the values of the student’s family. As an example, one interpretation for a student’s questionable college choice is that the limited knowledge and lowered aspirations of the lower class lead their youths to make less optimal college choices. Thus, we see that college choice, among other variables of the college pipeline problem, has often been discussed in terms of student characteristics, rather than institutional weaknesses and broader social structures that affect all students.

This chapter argues that students’ decision making about college is behavior that is understood only relative to a frame of reference. What a student will anticipate is dependent on her frame of reference—it will influence what alternatives are considered, and which ignored; what consequences are anticipated, and which are not. In this chapter, I focus on explicating how the social environment and the personal identity that is formed within that environment shape student participants’ considerations and anticipations in the college choice process. As such, motivations and preferences are not the same across individuals—students in general will subscribe to the general ideology of education (particularly higher education) transmitted through mainstream channels, but their motivations and preferences take on the particular shapes
that can only be fully understood if their social landscapes are considered. Mickelson’s (1990) study of the discrepancy between African American youths’ educational aspirations and achievement attempts to resolve the aspiration-achievement paradox by theorizing and testing aspiration or attitude as a multi-dimensional construct. Attitude, she says, can be conceived of as abstract, reflecting mainstream ideology, and concrete, reflecting an individual’s actual experiences in the area of concern. Within the area of education, African-Americans’ abstract attitude reflect the American ideology that education is the solution to most social problems, while their concrete attitude reflect “the material realities in which education may or may not lead to social mobility” (46).

If preferences and motivations are understood to be related to individuals’ social contexts, the notion of objective reality is destabilized. Thus, social constructionism is the approach taken in this study. Opportunities are not self evident if individual motivations are not universal: What is perceived as an opportunity depends on the specific needs and motivations of the individual. Self-understanding and knowledge, however, are not conceived as completely stable or perfect, as conditions change and ambiguity is accepted as part of experience. In the classic college choice model decision making is conceived as an orderly exercise of human coherence. The analysis I present here imagines that order in a different way, though at some level reinforces the idea that decision making is discerning behavior working on a coherent world. At the same time, I acknowledge the fundamentally ambiguous nature of decision making. The decision making of youths who choose the community college pathway are simultaneously intendedly rational and ambiguous: students survey their environment to gauge future consequences of current actions yet limited cognition and the uncertainties of processes and future preferences make their choice only partially grounded in logic.
In the following sections, students’ perspectives of college and specifically public two-year colleges are presented. I first illustrate the similarity in attitude towards the general idea of college across groups of students categorized along socioeconomic, racial, and nationality lines, then the divergent conceptions and college strategies that are based on individuals’ distinct frames of reference. The last section will be devoted to discussing the implications of the data.

**College Aspirations**

As other scholars have noted (e.g., Alexander et al, 2008; Downey et al, 2009), youths appear to be aware that some sort of postsecondary credentialing is now required for mobility within the job market. The participants in this study all think that a college education is important in today’s society, and nearly all report that they intend to access a four-year college via the community college pathway. In other words, their intention is to enroll in a two-year college in order to complete part of their baccalaureate education before transferring to a four-year institution. The goal of transferring differentiates them from people who use community colleges to only earn associate’s degrees, vocational certification, or take non-credit courses. The dominant pattern—the transfer goal—within this group signals to us that baccalaureate education is valued. In what ways the baccalaureate is valuable to students appear to vary according to demographic background and specific personal circumstances and the motivations that such circumstances provide. But, at the core, a four-year degree is universally valued for its economic benefits.

Some students highlight this aspect of the college degree more than others. For the low income participants, the expected economic returns of a college degree are of immediate relevance and related to their desire for autonomy. These participants’ discussions of their decision to enroll in college immediately after high school graduation suggest that they perceive
the imminently approaching stage of adulthood, and that they equate adulthood with financial independence. Many low income students, especially low income African American youths, report feeling the need to find ways to earn income effectively, preferably through a legitimate (safe) route. Wayne and Netta, two students from Wilson High, discuss why they chose to go to college:

Wayne: Yeah…I’m interested in going to college because what I’m going to do like if my mum and my daddy can’t feed me…then, umm, how I want to say it, like what am I going to do? I’m not going to sell drugs or I’m not going to, umm, be making minimum wage through life so, umm, the only way you can make it through life with a decent wage is getting through college. So I have to go to college. I don’t want to go, I must go. So I have to go to college just to get through life.

Netta: I decided to go to college because I know that, um, I gotta make a living and college right now is the best thing, because that is the way to make money… They say that’s the better way to do it. It’s more smarter. And if you, um, if you go to college you are less likely to get like a labor job, you know, cause if you don't really got an education, [you] get labor jobs. Hard labor.

Both students refer to the minimal labor options available for youths without any kind of college certificate or degree as a key source of motivation to participate in postsecondary education. For these youths, it isn’t simply that a high school credential (or less) garners minimum wage labor. It is that the lack of a college credential translates into the sorts of labor that takes its toll in a number of ways. Netta elaborates her response later in the interview by describing how her mother comes home from her job as a cook extremely worn down, without the energy to interact with her children. Wayne evokes images of a life of crime as a real possibility in his future if he doesn’t obtain some postsecondary education. It can be argued that these students perceive the act of graduating high school and enrolling in college as actively transitioning to adulthood, in that they are behaving in a discerning manner to ensure their material well-being. Wayne and Netta’s conception of college as a means to financial autonomy and self-preservation is typical of
the low income subgroup. To these high school student participants, adulthood has started before
the age of eighteen—they have engaged with adult issues that include the responsibility of
planning for oneself.

The idea that adulthood is a life stage predicated on financial independence is a specific
conception evoked far more often by the low income youths. Alternative conceptions brought
forth during other students’ discussions include independence from parental oversight, freedom
to create a new social life and adult identity, and the choice of constructing one’s studies. How
‘independence’ is constructed, then, depends on the person’s frame of reference. From the
middle class participants’ position, social and academic opportunities are more salient
motivations behind their college choice. It is not that financial stability isn’t relevant in these
students’ lives—it is that their security makes economic concerns less developed in their minds.
In contrast, low income youths experience poverty every day in various concrete forms.
Economic oppression—illustrated in Wayne’s observation of the two options currently open to
him (being a drug dealer or a menial worker)—infantilizes. There is no threat to the ego greater
than being permanently relegated to the margins of society.

Yet another college going frame offered by many of the first generation immigrant
students and some of the second generation participants is the country-of-origin perspective.
From this perspective, college represents opportunity:

Art: My mom is an immigrant to this country so she feels like you should take advantage
of every opportunity there is. She feels like you need to take advantage of all these
things that [are] given to you, you know? I mean she came from the Philippines and
so like coming from a country where things are all bad…I mean things just aren’t
that easy [there] and when you finally make it…I mean things just arent’t
[college].

Art came to the U.S. at the age of thirteen, old enough to understand and articulate his parent’s
motivations for migrating. Within his commentary, we see that college is constructed as a piece
of the imaginative American pie. From another immigrant student’s view, college isn’t just one opportunity among many in America—it is also the solution to second generation guilt (Fuligni, 2007). Tavis, a senior from Roosevelt High, explains that college is the means by which they can give back to their families:

Tavis: Oh, well the first reason I [plan to go] it's because my parents didn't [get to] go to college since we just move here in 2001… My older brother he, he um never really got the chance to go to the-, a real college but he just went to community [college] and then when he finished he just got a job. And now he's just like helping pay the bills [in] the house...[I] want a 4-year degree [to help] with paying the bills and maybe just like when [my parents] retire…just like help them along. And help my brother too.

Above, Tavis expresses guilt over the fact that his parents and brother did not have the opportunity (and he does) to develop skills and knowledge in college because they are immigrants. He, then, will take the opportunity to obtain a four-year degree and find a vocation that will allow him to support his family, in return for all their support for him. Thus, college is constructed by the immigrant students variously as a means to financial improvement on the one hand, and an obligation or responsibility to family on the other.

Students’ discussions of their college choice are generally holistic, pointing to multiple overlapping sources of motivation that are not necessarily hierarchical. If a breakdown of students’ motivations is to be mapped out, five sources may be distinguished. In order of frequency, the most common motives youths give for their choice to attend college after high school are as follows: necessity of credential, need for status, need to support family, knowledge/training, and college as rite of passage. *Necessity of credential* refers to students’ perception of the necessity of postsecondary credentials for many desirable jobs, whereas *need for status* refers to students’ desire to attain a higher social status. The third category, *family*,

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3 I took students’ (N=40) primary answer to the question of why they choose college as their main motivation(s).
4 Other reasons are given, but these five are the most common.
account for students’ references to family as a motivation for enrolling in college, while the fourth category refer to their belief in the intrinsic value of knowledge and specific skill training that postsecondary education can offer. And finally, college as rite of passage refers to students’ sense that college is now the norm and what people do after graduating from high school.

In sum, students express a strong value of higher education, especially its instrumental value in a job market that favors high skilled workers. Perhaps because the majority of the research participants are low income and working class, the college degree is most frequently cited as a credential that affords higher wages. While the specific motivations vary depending on the student’s background characteristics, the value of education that reflects mainstream ideology appear to be the same across subgroups. Differences in motivational sources that are grounded in the students’ social contexts become more apparent once we examine their choice for community college.

Community college choice is linked by students to their general college strategy. Like other youths transitioning into adulthood (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Alexander et al, 2008), the participants in this study have fairly high expectations in regards to their education. From the interview excerpts, it is clear that these students perceive community college as a pathway to a four-year education. A key question within this study is, why do these students choose two-year colleges as a pathway to a four-year degree? What are the significant patterns as to how students frame their community college choice? How do students’ framing of their choice reflect the constraints they perceive, the alternatives they consider, their self conceptualization in the context of college planning—in essence their fears, hopes, and expectations for themselves?
Community College as Strategy: How Students Simultaneously Enact Intersections of Race/ethnicity and Class and Re-imagine their Identity as College-goers

The students who volunteered to participate in this study are distinct in that they all intend to enroll in a community college immediately after high school graduation. Yet, their view that the two-year college is an optimal path to a baccalaureate degree can be unpacked to reveal at least two distinct conceptions of community college, from which we can infer differences in expectations, hopes and fears different students have. Two categories of students are presented in the following sections: The first comprise of youths who perceive community college as a strategic pathway to the best four-year college they can get; the second group is made up of youths who perceive community college as preparation for “real” college. Participants are placed in the former category if they express consistently throughout their high school interview that they see community college as a mobility strategy. That is, the two-year college is a tool they can use to gain a better understanding of which university would best further their long-term study/career goals or a tool to re-create their academic profile in order to access the most prestigious college possible. Participants are placed in the latter category if they express consistently throughout their high school interview that the two-year college is a place that will prepare them academically, and to a lesser extent socially, for “real” college. Both approaches

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5 There are three students who do not fall neatly into either categorizations presented here. Oscar, Joseph and Michael are immigrant youths who do not express confidence in obtaining a four-year degree but do not hold the sort of pessimism commonly found among the low-income African-American participants. Their concerns are tied up in finance (all three), English language skills (Joseph and Michael), and documentation (Oscar and Michael). These students express the country-of-origin narrative commonly found among immigrants, but because of the particularities of their circumstance, they do not have confidence that obtaining a four-year degree is feasible or would pay off for them.

6 Students in both groups often consider finance (the relative affordability of community college) in their discussions; the focus of this chapter, however, is on how they conceptualize community college.
can be viewed as mobility strategies; the distinction lies in students’ orientation of the future. The first group is more confident about reaching their educational goal of a four-year degree while the second group is more fearful, more cognizant of potential pitfalls that may prevent them from obtaining a baccalaureate.

**Community college as strategic pathway to 4-year university.** Within this research sample, a portion of the participants (n = 10) discuss their view of community college in terms of their global college strategy—gaining access to the most elite and suitable university. The two-year college is seen as a way to gain entry into the University of California system, which in California is more accessible if students complete their general education credits within the community college system first. Among the research participants, students who express the goal of using the two year college as a mobility strategy are the ones who have higher academic expectations of themselves, express greater confidence, and a more clear intent to transfer to a four-year institution. May, a senior from Washington High, is an example of such a student. She explains why she thinks the affordances of community college will facilitate her goal of finding the most suitable university:

May: Um, well I started looking at what four-year college I wanted to go to, uh, the end of junior year and the beginning of senior year. And I spent a lot of the summer looking into colleges…and tryin' to figure out what looked interesting. Um, and then towards the beginning of senior year when all the applications were due I realized that I didn't have a preference either way for any of these schools and it didn't make sense for me to just apply to a bunch of schools and then decide afterwards, because I have a 4.0 unrated GPA and I felt that I was, pretty much, gonna get in wherever I was applying or what was interesting for me and I didn't wanna be stuck in a four-year university's kind of 'box' before I knew what I wanted to do. What I was really interested in for my major. So, I decided that I wanted to figure that out first and then transfer so I was gonna do the [study abroad] program. And then I changed my mind about that and the alternative was to go to community college finish everything really quickly and then transfer…[Going straight to a four-year] wouldn't be as conducive for me in deciding what I wanted to major in... because I would be, you know, going to Freshmen seminar and they would be giving me all kinds of classes to help me
decide what I wanted to do. And-, but I feel like those would be a bit of a waste of my time. Um, cause I wouldn't be able to take a lot of credits. I would have a limit on that and I wouldn't have as wide, um, a variety of classes in one semester or one year than I would if I went to a community college and studied there and, you know, took 20 credits, and took a lot of classes and, and figured out what I wanted to do. ‘Cause a lot of the four-year colleges have limits on the number of credits you can take especially as a Freshman, whereas, with community college you can take up to 20, 26, 30 credits, which is a lot in one year.

In May’s explanation for her college choice, we can infer several things about this student. Her strategy suggests a thoughtfulness and confidence that, at least partially, come from sustained success in school. She perceives community college as a vehicle for self-exploration, one that can be used at a pace suitable for her intellect and preferences. There is confidence in her outlook: Success is assumed, only the route to get to the outcome is in question.

For other students, community college is more often couched in terms of “second chance” rhetoric. Charles, a student from Washington High, states that he is going to take the community college route because he “ messed up in high school… and [to] transfer to [the University of California at Berkeley]… [community college] is the best way.” Charles’ specific college choice is Green Valley, a community college known for its record of transferring students successfully into the public universities. By senior year, he decided his grades were inadequate and he needed to strategize about how best to enter the most prestigious of the UC campuses. In addition to engaging in “extra curricular stuff, the easy stuff” to “make it look good” for his future university application, he found a community college locally that has the best transfer record. These statements suggest his assumptions about the adequacy of his academic ability and the pay off of choosing the right college.

Among the participants who use community college as a strategic pathway are middle class students and those who obtained relevant social capital and support, for example, through their families or the small school organization. From these students’ perspective, an acceptable
level of financial support and academic resources are constants. We find that they conceive community college as a tool, and have gained enough specific knowledge about the institution that facilitates their college decision making. Community college is part of their college strategy to access the most elite or the most suitable four-year college for their interests. Their college decision making may be characterized as logic-based, given that their academic self concept and material security already aligns their college choice within the social realm of the community they identify with.

**Community college as preparation for “real” college.** In contrast, the fear of failure, a hyper-vigilance developed from repeated failures in particular contexts such as schooling, compels many disadvantaged youths in this study to carefully assess their chances of success in college. Those placed in this category ($n = 24$) are primarily low income African Americans ($n = 20$) and to a much lesser extent low income immigrant youths ($n = 4$) who show a significant vulnerability due to their academic experiences in high school.

A common belief among low income Black participants is that they need more academic preparation for college and that they may not be able to adjust to the rigor of a four-year college right after high school. Related to the first belief is a second that implicates public two-year colleges: At these places, students are given less stringent academic demands. The majority of the low income African American participants ($n = 16$, or $80\%$ of the sub-sample) raised concerns about their academic preparedness for college and/or state that they choose to enroll in a community college first, with the intent of transferring, because two-year colleges are less academically rigorous than four-year colleges. Alaine, a senior from Lincoln High, thinks that junior college is a better choice for her because it will not require her to “take on too much.”

Alaine: Um, just because I think that a four-year would have a completely different, um, level of education… and I think that, uh, uh, junior college is somewhere in
between high school and the four-year… I think it’s that learning in between.

Of significance is Alaine’s characterization of the academic rigor found in community college: “learning in between.” Learning in between means (to her) academic work that helps bridge the gap between the rigor of high school work experienced and that given in universities. Later in the interview Alaine says that community college is a “continuation of high school,” and in that way it works for her since she has always had trouble learning in school. She desires to go to college but feels she needs a slower paced environment and less stringent standards. In her framing of community college, we can infer the student’s painful awareness of the academic standards she actually achieved, and perhaps more importantly the contradictions in school rhetoric and practice.\(^7\)

Though most other low income Black students do not perceive themselves as having learning difficulties as Alaine does\(^8\), they expect they will have trouble adjusting to the rigor of a four-year college. These students subsequently believe that a two-year college would be a better academic fit for them. Below, Ray, Tim, and Bea offer their understanding of community college and how it meets their needs:

Tim: I will be attending Berkeley City College, to get my general education out of the way… And just kinda [get an] understanding of my, um, my working level and how much, I can take, uh, or how much I’m willing to take…I rather take my time. Some people are like “brainiacs”… That’s wonderful for that person, but I have to do that suitable amount that’s suitable for me.

Ray: Yeah…I will [persist] because I know…that if I just stick with it and really just try to get like, really try to get like [academic] help that I really need so that I could succeed and then yeah I’m gong to [persist] cause I know it’s going to benefit me in life. I don’t think I would plan on going to a 4 year after 2 years, after 2 years [of] junior college…So yeah I’m just going to do

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\(^7\) Students graduating high school are led to believe they have achieved the standards to be prepared for college level courses, yet confront misaligned standards when they reach college.

\(^8\) The wording here is meant to reflect students’ reports. Alaine reports that she felt she had learning difficulties, although she was never diagnosed. Other research participants who report being eligible for special education is reported here as having learning difficulties, as opposed to perceiving learning difficulties.
that and then, and then I hopefully will be able to have a good enough job to where I could take care of myself. Yeah…so most likely I’m just going to stick with a 2 year [college] ‘cause…I really be burnt out.

Bea: I choose to go to community college because it's cheaper…I know that [community college] is pretty much like high school… but in a different way. Like it's not as competitive as a [University of California] for some reason…I know that I still need to go to a [junior college] just to condition myself. In like jus' being-, I don't know, jus' like even though that maybe the J.C. work isn't as hard as the work at the U.C.s and stuff like that, I know that it's more of a-, I don't know how to put it but I know that it's like if you could do [work at a junior college then] you could do the work [at a university]. That's what I'm saying. I just need to-I know that I can do the work at the J.C. and a U.C. but I, I-, it's like taking steps, you know. I know I'm going to end up in a U.C. but it-, this is like a stepping stone.

In these three students’ conceptualizations of community college, we find one significant common thread: The two-year college is considered preparation for “real” college. Junior college education is variously described by these students and Alaine as “conditioning,” a “stepping stone,” “learning in between,” general education to test academic ability, and opportunity for academic help. Bea says she needs to condition herself for the university, which means she needs to strengthen her academic skills through community college so that she has a good chance of successfully completing a bachelor’s education: “it's like if you could do [work at a junior college then] you could do the work [at a university].” Similarly, Alaine, later in her interview, describes community college as a “stepping stone” to the university, an opportunity to do academic work in preparation for university level academic rigor. Tim says that he wants to get an understanding of his “working level” or how much stress he can or would be willing to take. This means he is seeking to know how well he can perform academically in a college setting that is less high stakes. And of the four, Ray expresses a special tiredness from years of academic difficulty, being “burnt out” and now only opting for a two-year college that may offer more academic help and less academic stress. In essence, community college is perceived as academically less difficult than a four-year college—and thus not a full-fledged college: Here,
students who are not yet ready for “real” college, and who themselves, we may think, are unsure they can be “real” college students, have a chance to prepare. Alaine, Bea, Tim, and Ray represent a range of the low income African American participants, with Ray and Tim at one end and the other two closer to mid range based on their reported academic expectations for themselves and the clarity of their intent to transfer to a four-year institution.

At another end of the spectrum is Netta, who reports doing well in academics throughout high school and feels community college is the best path for her to take to ensure she will get to the bachelor’s degree, and eventually, a law degree. The specifics of her reasoning, however, take a very similar form to that of Bea and Alaine.

Netta: The reason why I [choose community college] is because it's a lot cheaper and plus because I was thinking…some people I know too like they, um, went straight to a four year and then they, um, it was a little bit overwhelming. It wasn't enough financial aid…sometimes they'd run out of it so then they'll go back to a community college and they'll just start over from there. Yeah, I don't want, I don't want that to happen to me…When I was in ninth grade sometimes [graduates from our high school] come back and they tell about their experiences…They just had to work…it was just too much, it was too much. Plus [four-year college] I think too, it's a lot more difficult [in terms of academics]…Um [teachers and counselors], they all actually encouraged me to go to, um, the four year. But, I'm not gonna listen. I mean, I'll listen to 'em but I'm not gonna let them, um, let them talk me into going to a four year school first thing right after high school. I tell them I wanna get more prepared, but they get mad and say my grades show that it’s not I'm not prepared. But I just-, I wanna-, I don't want that same experience to happen to me, what happened to everybody else.

Netta’s response corresponds to Bea and Alaine’s in two ways: She is hyper-sensitive to the fact that she is low income and that her academic achievement in high school may, in fact, not be an accurate predictor of how she might do in a four-year college. For these youths who fear debt and academic misfit, community college is perceived as a lower risk path to take to a four-year degree. In Netta’s response, we infer that the path is lower risk in that failure—in the form of
complete withdrawal—would not involve changes that highlight change in status (e.g., returning home, being known as a drop out).

As outlined above, African American students’ educational aspirations are like other youths’—they value higher education and they expect to make strides towards some sort of postsecondary degree. If we only considered their general attitude towards college, they would not be any different from other students. Yet, when low income African American youths’ conception of community college is examined, and their specific college strategies considered, we see that the frame of reference they use to approach college have significant implications. The frame of reference constrains the possibilities under consideration—the appropriate routes to be taken to the ultimate destination (which is the same for most students—the four-year college), the particular criteria to be used to gauge progress, and the variety of sub-goals to be set along the way. Further, the frame inevitably constrains the set of behavioral repertoires triggered, a key factor affecting progress that is often sub-conscious and not always under active consideration. The metaphorical language used here to describe the college choice phenomenon is meant to convey important aspects of decision making: Frame of reference is like a field of vision. The spatial environment, the resources available in the environment, the traveler, the position from which she starts are key elements of the metaphor. The college-going student is the traveler who sets the ultimate goal of the four-year institution as the destination. Depending on where she starts her journey, her vision of the landscape—the totality of pathways, obstructions, resources, climate, time involved—is from a particular perspective. From her view, we can infer a number of things. What is seen, what options or alternatives are considered, what behavioral routines utilized all reflect the position from which the traveler currently stands. The history of her journey is also revealed within her frame.
When students focus on certain aspects of their social environment in their discussion of their college choice, we need to ask, what environmental mechanisms evoke the set of responses? Specifically, what are the cues from the social environment beyond the school setting students pay attention to when confronted with college decision making? Why do students perceive the constraints they do, the options they have, the expected outcomes? The focus here is not only on the environment as context for cognition, but also on understanding why particular environmental cues are more salient than others.

Second, when students employ particular narratives to make sense of their decisions, we need to ask, why would particular explanations be used in particular contexts? Chalking students’ use of certain explanations up as cultural repertoire conceals their possible motivations for using them and the underlying environmental triggers. The focus here is on why particular narratives or explanations are used over others in particular contexts, and on how causally linked sequence of events are exchanged and built upon one another.

In Netta’s explanation of why she chooses the community college route over going straight into a four-year college, we find three important emphases that are echoed in many other low income students’ (especially African Americans’) interviews: The expense of four-year institutions, inadequate academic preparation, and the preparatory role of community college. These beliefs can be traced to what students experience within their social environment and the resulting self-conceptualization.

It is argued here that the perception low income African American youths have about the inaccessibility of four-year colleges is a result of the web of interrelated observations students

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9 The first refers to the view that four-year colleges are too expensive for the average low income student who cannot fall back on family financial support nor full scholarships. The second and third are the views that the public school education low income students receive is not adequate college preparation, and that these students need more academic preparation, which community colleges provide.
make about their academic experiences, poverty, and typical neighborhood residents. Beyond students’ calculation of the costs or inputs of college investment, the perception of four-year colleges’ inaccessibility is really about their sense of social affiliation, which is a layered process that encompasses group positioning and the environmental context of social dynamics.

Many of the research participants describe their material realities as consisting of underemployment, neighborhood violence, fractured support systems, and uneven schooling experiences—factors that imply severe constraints on the activities, human development, and hopes of youths. Some students, like Cliff, a senior from Roosevelt High, couch their drive to go on to college in terms of their crime-ridden neighborhoods—to communicate the conditions that shape their aspirations for the future. Describing his considerations when he decided for himself the eventual goal of a four-year college, Cliff says:

Cliff: Well because, umm, umm, I guess growing up in Oakland there’s really not much out here to do for like young people and I just want to see something else, experience something new. So that’s why I choose to go to college and create a better life for myself and my family...It’s pretty bad at times...for the most part I would say you just have to be cautious of like your surroundings and have street smarts out here. Because you can’t just like walk into anybody’s territory without knowing the area period cause you never know what’s going to happen...At a pretty early age cause I grew up in East Oakland and, umm, I stayed right around the corner from Royo Rio Park, and over there, there was a lot of like shootings and jumpings and like on my 5th grade field trip we went, umm, through the creek cause we used to go catch frogs and we discovered a cadaver and we called the police...So its like you had to be smart about like where you choose to hang out and what time you’re out around there...'Cause over [in East Oakland], umm, my cousin was shot in his Camaro 'cause a man just tried to get his, he tried to steal his Camaro and he was just shot sitting there doing nothing, minding his own business. So I mean it’s pretty rugged over there, they have a lot of gangs.

The description of the nonsensical violence that occur regularly—enough so that students who live in these neighborhoods can easily cite examples of acquaintances, friends and/or relatives who have died in unexpected and senseless ways—hint at the sort of material poverty that
motivate people to “get his,” a slang which means taking an opportunity, regardless of circumstance and consequences, because a person believes he deserves a piece of the pie that is society’s wealth. Youths who live in poor urban areas must contend with the psychological consequences that come out of the material environment. One of these consequences is the construction of the self within a framework that entails, at one level, the psychic reality derived from harsh material conditions, and at another level, the meaning made of one’s worth in an unequal society where only some are allowed humane conditions. Cliff, as a young child, cannot feel safe in his neighborhood, always on the lookout for danger, and as an adult, contemplates his luck with college investment as he looks back on his cousin’s brutal death.

The material context in which these African American youths grow up in is also characterized along the dimension of economic opportunities available for the young. As described above, Wayne and Netta referred to the minimal labor options available for youths living in their area. When imagining what he would do if his parents could not feed him and he could no longer stay in school, Wayne thought of selling drugs or making minimum wage at jobs that are available to him. These minimum wage jobs tend to be at the few fast food chains that can be found in the vicinity. Damond, a student from Roosevelt High, says he intends to go to college because “I want to like better myself, [not] just like working at Burger King or something.” The fact that Burger King and drug dealing are the only alternatives Damond and Wayne immediately think of when asked about their educational plans indicates that the economic opportunities available to these youths are very limited. The options are also perceived as undesirable—options that place relegate them to the margins of society—and such a poor opportunity set propels their search for more acceptable alternatives.
Yet, other experiences within the realm of material conditions complicate their process of working towards college. In impoverished neighborhoods, public schools reflect the resources of its constituents. Student participants speak of uneven schooling experiences that point to bare material resources, ineffective disciplinary actions, youth violence, inconsistent supply of teachers, and more. Such material school conditions come hand in hand with students’ experiences with academic failure or limited academic growth. Lana, a student from Wilson High, recounts her experiences at the high school before it was converted into a small community of schools her sophomore year:

Lana: I was depressed mostly during high school ‘cause of what was happening at home…so my academics weren’t great… Before junior year, teachers weren’t that understanding of students’ needs. Like one teacher [would] lock the classroom door after the bell and he called parents afterwards…If a teacher cared, they would find out what was happening with students before they walked into the classroom, they’d be better teachers then…Yeah when [Wilson High] was whole, it was a bad environment…students got robbed or shot sometimes, materials was outdated, classroom caps was big- way over 30 a class…teachers striked…Substitute teachers affected our progress a lot. Some substitutes would follow teacher plans but others don’t.

These schooling experiences, in addition to her complicated home life, led to a truncated college choice process, whereby she did not think about college at all during high school, doing all she could to just keep her head above water and graduate high school. Only towards the end of senior year did she decide to go to a local community college, with few other options available. Though she opted to strive for a two-year degree within the immediate future, she thought little about academic planning. Lana’s experience of being in the position of always “catching up” during high school and not having the space to plan and prepare for the next stage was echoed in many other participants’ discussions.

The effects of academic failure on the formation of academic self-concept can be observed among many of the participants. Ellen, another student from Wilson, describes her
emotional reaction to the idea that she could go to college during her senior year: “Well, I mean I always thought about [college] but it really just came like this year when I saw my grades go up so I was like I can go—really go to college! I thought…I couldn’t go to a State [university] …[But] talking to teachers and just people telling me that…I was smart and that I could go to school.” Since she didn’t have good grades and the appropriate A-G requirements, and thus couldn’t qualify for a State University, she assumed she wasn’t smart enough try to reach a four-year college through another route. Repeated failure at critical junctures in school appears to create robust fear about one’s ability in future situations within the context of schooling. Ray, a student from Washington High, explains that if he has a choice, he’d rather not go to school because:

Ray: Why go to school and fail?

Here he is referring to his experiences throughout high school of not being able to learn well and not getting enough extra support from teachers to be able to succeed. Each of these students points to everyday negative academic experiences as an influence on their expectations for their academic futures. The process of developing an academic identity is ambiguous for these students: The reality of the labor market coupled with students’ hopes for themselves propel these youths towards college, yet, at the same time, students perceive evidence from multiple sources that destabilize their hopes for themselves.

An important dimension of the material reality within which participants live is the modal adult figure within the community. In poor urban areas, there inevitably exist people who are unemployed. And these unemployed are inevitably somebody’s relative, neighbor or former schoolmate. For African Americans who live in highly segregated neighborhoods, the unemployed person who lives in the neighborhood also resembles in terms of race. The data in
Table 2.1 suggests that low income Black American participants contend with housing segregation more than other racial minorities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sociodemographic characteristics</th>
<th>Other students (n = 20)</th>
<th>African Am students (n = 20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low income*</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental education: High school degree or less**</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial minority</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban residence</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Information is based on student self-reports.

** If at least one parent obtained some sort of postsecondary degree, then the student is categorized as not a first generation college student.

In the table summary of each group’s sociodemographic characteristics, we see the proportion of student participants who are first generation college student, racial minority, and living in urban neighborhoods in each group are similar, but the rates of poverty and urban residency are reported to be higher among African American students.

Bare economic opportunities intersect with racial discrimination to produce the kind of environment Cliff and others describe above. The youths’ social identities develop in complex ways in response. Low income African American participants describe the concentration of poverty and its intersection with race in their neighborhoods in their explanations of what motivates them to reach for higher education. Typical explanations of why a student chooses to enroll in college focus on the modal adult figure:

Jordan: I really wanna go ‘cause I-I wanna be the first one and um because I wanna be somethin’ in life. I just…I don’t wanna be like all the other dudes on the streets…I wanna be somebody one day.

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10 Even if we take out the two participants who identified themselves as mixed race and middle class from the “other students” category and only considered the rest (who are first and second generation immigrants), the gap in household income would still be sizeable—67% and 95% low income respectively. Urban residency would be 72% and 100% respectively. The fact of the similarity in education level between immigrant and low income African American participants dovetail with these numbers to suggest immigrant families are somehow more likely to pool their resources for group ends.
Ellen: People in the streets that I see ain’t doing nothin’ with theyselves. I be wantin’ a better life for myself, than like bums and stuff.

Ray: Because I know later on in life I don’t want to be like a bum person.

Damond: I want to like better myself, [not] just like working at Burger King or something…I can make sure my life is great, not average like everybody else…Living average [is] like just having to worry more about debt…about bills.

Netta: I’m going to college ‘cause if that’s where the um money’s at then I wanna go. Because you know I wanna make sure I make something of myself. I see [my family] and then I’ll be trying to—I don’t wanna be like that, you know?

Jenn: I’m choosing to go to college because I don’t want to be another statistic, you know, like another black female out on the street doing nothing with her life. Not only that my mom didn’t go to college so it kind of inspired me to go and do more for myself to better my future.

These student responses are typical of this participant sub-sample. They indicate the youths’ reactions to the impoverished modal adult figure within their community—a mixture of demoralization and willful hope. In the reactions we can infer students’ association with neighborhood residents. Even if they themselves do not belong to a household living in poverty and unemployment, residential proximity facilitates a sense of association or identification, a process of categorizing based on shared living experience. Hence, the youths feel demoralized when they turn to neighboring adults who reflect poverty and stigmatization on themselves.

African American youths assert that their college decisions are a way to ensure they do not end up like the people in the streets. As student statements on the previous page illustrate, black youths are quite conscious of the underprivileged, likely because they associate themselves in some way with the modal adult in the local neighborhood. A more extreme case is Netta, whose assertion about not wanting to be like her family refers to her feelings about her mother who is on disability and a brother who is chronically unemployed. In the (above) statement of “I don’t want to be like [them],” there is a suggestion that she feels there is a danger that she will
end up like them if she is not vigilant. Though Netta is atypical of the sample in that she refers to her own family as examples of poor adult models, she is typical in that she uses the poor in general as a reference group.

The poor and the disenfranchised make up the frame of reference when low income Black youths are asked to think about their motivation for continuing with their education. Their frame of reference motivates them seek more acceptable alternatives. In the process, it influences what alternatives are considered, and which ignored; what consequences are anticipated, and which are not. Student participants favor the public two-year college, taking into consideration their personal experience with academic obstacles, the limited financial support they have, and the educational experiences of others like them. Paths taken by the more privileged tend to be dismissed more easily. As an example, Netta, in her explanation of why she decided not to spend more time looking for and obtaining financial aid, says,

Netta: I don't know, I don't know why I didn't apply! I was meetin’ the requirements like…GPA and stuff like that. I was just-, I don't know. Oh, I remember one thing-, another reason why I didn't apply [was because], um, I think in all the scholarships they always wanna know what extra curricula activities you do... and I really wasn't doing…sports or clubs...I wasn't doin' nothin' like that. If anything, [I was] workin'...Yeah, and I didn't have [what they asked for]!...It was just like, what could I put down? Why would they want me, you know? Why, some other kid probably got a whole bunch of, um... extracurricular activities…Yeah…And my parents don't work. It's just-, [there’s] not enough time 'cause I need to get some money for me. Trying to survive! …Yeah, [for] like clothes and…just money, lunch money... I never asked [counselors about the scholarship application questions]. I just thought-, I don't know, [counselors] always just say colleges like that stuff. [Counselors] didn't really elaborate on that. They just wanted me to apply [and tell me] don’t worry about that in the application. They just say that [there’s] a college out there for you... But, I don't know, I just-, there just would've been the blank on my scholarship and I probably wouldn't [get it] and I don't wanna do that work for nothin’…Yeah. And they don't know what go on in my life. They don't know…And they probably don't even care why either. They just probably don't- didn't even care… I don't-, I didn't have everything [so] I want to, um, go to a two-year [college] first. I really just want to go the easy, medium, [and then] hard steps.
Netta’s reasoning for dismissing the option of applying for scholarships is grounded in very real obstacles. School and financial scholarships are biased towards the middle class point of view—wherein certain activities are valued over others. Collegiate sports, moreover, play a special role for colleges. Low income students like Netta, however, often cannot or do not participate in typically prized extracurricular activities when they have other responsibilities due to family circumstances. What makes the situation less clear for her is school agents’ limited understanding of the effects of the financial aid process on her psyche. Low income students at some level know the biases of supposedly meritocratic school processes, and the tensions underlying American rhetoric about opportunity-for-all via schooling.

These students intuitively scan their environment to obtain information relating to social, economic, and other variables that would help reduce the risky consequences in their decision making. Earlier, Netta explained why she is choosing community college over a four-year institution, despite her teachers’ and counselors’ protests. Students from Wilson High benefited (at the time of this study) from alumni events held by the high school, where former students who went on the four-year colleges would come back to mentor younger students. During the events, which were meant to promote college-going, Netta and others would meet alumni attending four-year colleges, whom they later discovered had to withdraw due to academic and financial obstacles. Netta used this piece of information to inform her decision making about the risks of going straight to a four-year college. While the school alumni did not intend to discourage younger peers, the inconsistency between rhetoric and facts is picked up by high school students as red flags. Youths who regularly experience disappointments or failures appear

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11 Fine’s (2007) case study documents this phenomenon in detail, coming to the same conclusion I do here.
to pay close attention to signals that help them gauge the wisdom or foolishness of practices that are less common within their families and community.

Table 2.2 outlines the challenges students cite in their accounts of their college process. These challenges are listed by two sub-groups in the research sample—African American and other participants—to show where the two diverge in their experiences. For illustrative purposes, the general category of “other student” is used here. Though this sub-group includes a variety of students, the majority are actually made up of low income or working class first and second generation immigrant youths. Though immigrant and native students use different reference points in their discussions of motivations for college, it is useful here to examine how often immigrant youths cite the issues that most often arise among African American youths.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of challenge affecting view of college</th>
<th>Others* N = 18</th>
<th>African Americans N = 20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic difficulties by participant</td>
<td>33% (n=6)</td>
<td>80% (n=16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close peers who are not college going</td>
<td>22% (n=4)</td>
<td>35% (n=7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failed college attempt by parent**</td>
<td>0% (n=0)</td>
<td>40% (n=8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failed college attempt by older sibling</td>
<td>5% (n=1)</td>
<td>30% (n=6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School process-related obstacles</td>
<td>39% (n=7)</td>
<td>35% (n=7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty or poor adult models</td>
<td>39% (n=7)</td>
<td>70% (n=14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Two students have been excluded from this category. They report themselves as natives (White and mixed race) and middle class. The ones who are included are first or second generation Asian and Latino immigrant youths, and nearly all low income or working class.
** If student has another relative as a guardian in place of her biological parents, then that adult would be counted as the parent.

When African American participants spoke of future aspirations and their postsecondary plans during the high school interviews, they referenced certain experiences which they perceived as impactful for their college orientation. The five experiences listed in Table 2.2 make up a particular narrative common to low income African American youths in this study. The first
is academic difficulties experienced in secondary schools (80%), followed by poor adult models in their neighborhood (70%). Poor adult models refer to descriptions students give of people are homeless or poor, hanging around the neighborhood “doing nothing.” The next themes cited by more than a third of the students are failed college attempts made by parents (40%), close peers who are not planning to go to community college or four-year colleges (35%), and high school processes that negatively influenced students’ perception of the accessibility of college (35%). Finally, a theme that was prominent in African American students’ college talk is failed college attempts made by older sibling(s) (30%). While two of the themes were brought up by quite a few of the first and second generation immigrant students, notice in general how much less frequently immigrant youths cite the issues often raised by African Americans—particularly failed college attempts by parents and older siblings and academic difficulties in secondary schools on the part of the student. Thus, it appears the intersection of nationality/generational status with class produce different views among immigrant youths compared to the intersection of race with class among native Blacks.

Their own negative experiences with academics were discussed by the greatest number of African-American students, though the interview data does not clearly identify the main source(s) behind the academic difficulties cited. The self-reported academic difficulties cut across school contexts for African American students, despite the differences in organizational structuring of the schools. Selection bias (sampling only students who self-selected community college as their path into higher education) does not appear to offer a ready explanation for this

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14 When probed, most first and second generation immigrant participants report that parents and other older family members did not complete high school or college, but such events are explained not as failed attempts but as a result of lack of opportunities stemming from a low resource environment.

15 These students attended four differently organized high schools in two adjacent cities. One is low performing comprehensive school, one a higher performing comprehensive school, one a small community of schools, and one a continuation school.
pattern either, considering the noticeably fewer reports of academic difficulties among other participants in the same schools. It may be that the cumulative force of other social experiences in conjunction with school-specific issues may affect academic performance (as indicated by Lana earlier).

Beyond individual academic difficulties outlined above, a good proportion of African American participants reported older family members’ unsuccessful attempts at college. The norm among low income and working class African American youths is sub-baccalaureate education and under-employment, especially among males. Though Table 2 shows that only 40% of the participants state their parents attempted college but did not obtain any degree, and 30% say the same of their older siblings, keep in mind that nearly all of the rest\textsuperscript{16} report that their parents and siblings did not attempt to go to college at all.

The cumulative experience of living in poor, racially segregated urban neighborhoods, learning (or not learning) in inadequate schools, having a family history of interrupted college experiences, and watching peers who could not successfully go straight to a four-year college have an impact on these youths’ attitude towards college. While they value higher education like their peers, the experiences described above, that make up the material and social conditions of low income African Americans, inform their understanding of the constraints they live with, the alternatives they have, their self-conceptualization and expectations for higher education. The material context in which they live—given shape and texture by impoverished residents, crime, segregation—also give rise to their class and racial identity, wherein they make sense of themselves in relation to others in society. Identification with a social group entails feelings of affiliation, but marginalized youths also often hope to cross social boundaries to position

\textsuperscript{16} Except two students who say one parent obtained a bachelor’s degree.
themselves higher within the social hierarchy. Reaching for a university is a symbolic act of crossing boundaries. Thus, the perception that four-year colleges are inaccessible is fundamentally about the social gap between the marginalized and the privileged felt by youths.

Connie, a student from Wilson High, explains her choice for a public two-year college in terms of her family history and its effect on her outlook:

Connie: It’s like in my family people went to college but it kind of never worked out for them. So that kind of turned my head off like should I go to college? It didn’t work out for everybody in my family. They have some college experience but they never followed through with it and I’m like I don’t want to add on to the legacy of not finishing college. Is that something really for me? So before I go to four-year [college], I’m like I think I’m going to try a two-year and see if I can hang, if I can handle it. Because if not, then [college] is not for me.

In this interview, the student does not state that she believes she will not be able to complete college. However, the glaring pattern of college incompletion in her family, among the cousins, aunts, uncles, parent, and grandmother who tried either community or four-year colleges, creates an attention to the danger of college failure. Connie says she does not want to “add on to the legacy of not finishing college,” suggesting that she suspects the strong pattern of college incompletion may have something to do with the resources or attributes of the family, so that certain behavioral attributes may be passed down. This student, and other participants who reported interrupted college experiences among older family members, point to the inadequacy of a concept schools and education researchers regularly employ in outreach efforts—the first generation college student. Though the concept is useful, it does not apply well to many of the African American students in this study who do have close relatives with college—especially community college—experience.

Connie is a clear example of how a pattern of interrupted college experience within the family allows certain knowledge to be transmitted, yet creates a problematic vigilance. Her
expressed caution borders on fearful anxiety in respect to her perception of failure being passed on. Such caution can be both productive and detrimental. Being overly attentive to failure can be harmful in that it stymies hope, effort, or goal setting. It may also encourage fearful thinking. At the same time, this caution prompts her to think through the requirements and challenges of college attendance.

Exacerbating the condition of limited educational attainment is the silence that often surrounds older family members’ experiences in school or college. Lana, a student from Wilson High, typifies this group of students in this statement: “The ones that didn’t go to college I asked them why and they said they just-they had better things to do.” While not all youths directly ask relatives why they chose not to attend college or leave prematurely, the pattern revealed through interviews with students is that their older relatives do not discuss in detail their college experiences, particularly if they did not obtain a degree. Some do offer advice, such as Ellen’s older brother who did not obtain a degree: “[He said] don’t try to take too many classes…he basically said don’t enroll full-time or don’t work and go to school [at the same time] because you’d be overloading yourself…and try to work like, um, work-study through the school.” In such advice, the Ellen might infer that college academics was too difficult for her brother, and may be also too difficult for her as well17. One might argue that it is more harmful for younger members to form their own conclusions about discouraging patterns they see among family.

Within this research sample, the fear of failure, a hyper-vigilance developed from repeated failures in particular contexts such as schooling, compels many youths (African American and others) to carefully assess their chances of success in college. When they are unable to gain explanations for older relatives’ interrupted college attempts, they will look to

17 We know that an older sibling’s achievement influences the younger sibling’s. How that happens is less clear.
other signals. A clear example is Netta who looked to older peers’ experiences as a reliable source of information to help her make sense of the pattern of failed college attempts, rather than high school institutional agents (as explained earlier).

**The Underpinnings of Failure-induced Search**

The intersection of student participants’ racial and socioeconomic identities produces particular concrete experiences which shape their specific expectations about college and the strategies they employ. The college search behavior of low income youths—particularly African American youth—is driven, in part, by failure. What this means is that while the students’ goal of accessing college remains, their approach to reaching that goal is shaped by past negative experiences: Taking large risks, pushing boundaries, to reach the goal is less desirable compared to staying closer to known paths and territories. Failure-induced search, therefore, is distinguished by the methods that result from risk-aversion. In student interviews, we find that students who have experienced a host of negative signals (i.e., poverty, underemployment, uneven schooling experiences, family’s education) tend to use those social experiences that help them predict their schooling outcome as their frame of reference. These students include both low income African American and low income immigrant participants.

Quin, a second generation Vietnamese-American student from Roosevelt High, typifies a student whose college search behavior is largely shaped by his aversion to risk. He describes his approach to college decision-making as goal planning within the context of his family, academic, and financial constraints. Initially, at the beginning of his senior year, he explored several options—four-year state colleges and universities, art colleges, community colleges, and the Marines. But by spring of that year, he felt that public four-year colleges and universities, not to mention art schools, were far out of his reach.
Quin: [My friends and I] kind of almost have similar reasons on why we’re not going to a UC [University of California] or a [Cal State University]. It’s because of our financial status. Most of us, we’re really not that rich so we can’t really have our parents pay for our colleges and we can’t, um, you know, we can’t really at the same time we can’t really qualify for as much financial aid. Some of my friends are able to qualify…but other ones I don’t know why…they’re somehow just not able to get through to their financial aid…Even though they got accepted, they chose community college instead.

In the spring of his senior year, Quin felt he could only realistically consider public two-year colleges or the Marines, given his understanding of his financial constraints and prior academic experiences. Working within a poor financial aid guidance structure in high school, Quin leaned towards a postsecondary choice which would allow him the opportunity to secure financial support for his widowed mother. By the end of high school, he strongly considers the Marines. His prior classroom learning experiences play a role in his decision:

Quin: The programs [the marines] say they’re not easy but they want to help you, they’ll try their best to help you, um, get you at that level of skills, cause just writing down and learning is not for me. And then they [the marines] will make me do it as in like doing it and actually going out…Money was just a starting point.

In his statement, Quin alludes to the kind of learning he experienced in public schools—the “writing down” sort—that has not worked well for him. In contrast to just reading and writing, the Marines tell him they offer a different sort of teaching that would guarantee his success. Moreover, “they’ll try their best to help you,” a motivation he has not always felt from his teachers in school, especially the long-term substitute teachers who are in charge of core academic subjects (a phenomenon reported to be a common occurrence at his high school). In his mind, enrolling in an engineering program offered by the Marines appears more practical, if they are more likely to bring about success in learning.

Though Quin began his college search with a wider lens—with a large set of possibilities under consideration—he quickly adjusted the size of the set of alternatives he would consider
once he contemplated his unsuccessful application for financial aid (for grants) and his academic record in traditional classrooms. The risk he would be taking if he places himself in a four-year institution, given these considerations, are significant for him. His search strategy becomes more risk-averse with each layer of ambiguity. He adjusts his goal to obtaining an education or skill training that will more likely help him reach his life goals of finding a steady career and the ability to support family, with fewer liabilities.

His family’s experience with college provides a context that helps him predict his chances in the job market with a college degree. He reports, “[My siblings] they’re struggling… my brother has to go through three or four jobs and my dad, even though he graduated from Lake Community College, he had to switch jobs constantly. He moved away, we moved all the time…” In addition to his fears about his chances for success in a traditional classroom environment and his family’s financial constraints, he considers how a community college education as experienced by his father has not increased his job opportunities or the family’s living stability. We can infer that his childhood experiences of having been uprooted regularly due to job and financial instability contributes to his expectations of failure: Since his father was not able to obtain a steady job with a community college degree, Quin himself may not be able to succeed at the task either.

Together, his experiences contribute to his aversion to making a large financial investment in a college education:

Quin: [Employers] could [hire] anybody else way better than me even though I went to a fancy [University of California] or something. There is still going to be somebody who has more experience that they’re going to hire. So [a university degree] would increase my chance of getting that job but it’s not going to be a guarantee. And then I’m going to have to owe the government a whole lot of money and I don’t know what to do.
Unlike May and Charles who assume college will pay off, Quin perceives a university education as far from a guarantee. In his statement, we find his expectation that someone like him will always be relatively less desirable in the job market, and that taking out college loans will lead to unpaid debt, which would be an outcome resulting from his perceived undesirability. The reasoning is tautological. Such a statement suggests a conceptualization of a self that is deeply tied to the student’s perception of his positioning in the world.

Not all low income students express the idea that college loans can’t be paid back, but all are very sensitive to the cost of four-year colleges and are reticent about taking out loans. The sensitivity to taking out school loans is behavior that is risk-averse. Bea, the African American student cited previously, explains her deep fear of the cost of a college education and the danger of taking out college loans:

Bea: I think I’m gonna need [financial aid] but I’ll be able to afford [a junior college] more…like it’s not as expensive. Like when you think of a four-year you think of like going broke. And it’s like I’m not ready for that. And I don’t have anything to where I can get a scholarship…I’ll do financial aid but I wouldn’t do like any loans cause I don’t- cause I know that a lot of people [can’t] pay ‘em back and they’re in debt like forever.

Bea, like Quin and his friends, is low income and unable to qualify for significant scholarships. She, like the others, perceives her most viable alternative is to apply for a state grant to pay for community college classes. The constraints she feels—not having money now, not having money in the future—is echoed in other students’ interviews. Is their perception of such constraints anchored only in their own pessimism? According to the students, this is not so. Lana, another student who does not intend to take out college loans, says, “I heard from [relatives] that taking out loans you could be in debt a long time. People a lot of times can’t pay them back.” Like Bea and Quin, Lana’s personal relationship with people who have been unable to pay back school
loans due to recurring unemployment is key to the formation of her belief\textsuperscript{18}.

Another way students’ risk aversion manifests itself is through the idea that it is better to
develop an understanding of college and explore academic areas of interest in a community
college\textsuperscript{19}. In Bea’s interview, we find several significant observations about community college
choice among working class and low income youths, echoed previously in other participants’
discussions, that may be aligned. There is the fear of the cost of a college education and the
danger of taking out college loans; another is the relative academic rigor of four-year institutions
as opposed to two-year colleges. These fears are appeased when students stay within a known
territory—the local community college.

Bea: I choose to go to community college because it's cheaper and it's-, why would you
waste like all that time tryin' to make up your mind when you could just go [to
community college] and make up your mind...I know I'm ready to go to college but
not a [university]. It's more like I'd rather take it slower. I don't feel like I-, cause
that would be-, uh, too much harder...I still need to go to a J.C. first and jus' work
my way up there... [My friends] never talk like [about academic programs]
we really talk about jus' basically we always talk about it being cheaper and...
it's easier.

Making up one’s mind in community college may be perceived as less costly and stressful for
students who don’t understand how college really works. In Bea’s statement that she and her
friends do not ever talk about academic programs when they discuss college, we may infer that
these students do not (or know how to) evaluate colleges in terms of their academic programs.
Evaluating an academic program would entail knowing under what criteria a program would be
considered strong, and how to construct an undergraduate academic program of study for

\textsuperscript{18} The understanding that people often can’t pay back college loans were most often raised by low income African American participants. This perception is not prevalent only in the African American community, however. Other student participants who have direct experience with people who obtained some postsecondary education but experienced recurring unemployment also hold the belief that college loans are very risky.

\textsuperscript{19} This finding is also documented in McDonough’s (1997) study of college choice.
oneself\textsuperscript{20}. In this way, “making up one’s mind” is an umbrella term that includes learning the fundamental organization and assumptions of a college. As Damond, another student from Roosevelt High, says, the most stressful thing about looking ahead to college—including community college—is “not knowing what to expect.”

Choosing to start at a community college is one way many students deal with their aversion to the risks involved with postsecondary education. Another strategy that was discussed by a small number of low income African American youths is enrolling in a vocational program while exploring a transfer-track curriculum. Cliff and Era, two students who reported relatively strong grades during high school, spoke of such plans for themselves, as a means to obtain guaranteed income to pay for the expense of a transfer-track/bachelor’s degree program later. Others reported having relatives give them such suggestions. Students’ strategy of entering higher education through the technical education track within community college, is worth further exploration.

Failure-induced search is an approach we find among students who perceive community college as a way to prepare for “real college.” It encompasses a variety of specific strategies resulting from a student’s frame of reference, including risk-adverse micro-level decisions and forecasting one’s outcomes based on others’ experiences. This approach is at once logic-based and conservative. Earlier, we found that, among the research participants, low income African American students use the neighborhood modal adult figure to establish goals for themselves. These adult figures make up their reference group, which consists of people they associate themselves with, and the subsequent understanding of their self as embedded within a reference group affects their college search activities. College search activities are shown to be essentially

\textsuperscript{20} This topic will be taken up in the next chapter.
a social activity—it is about finding a social group that one aspires to and feels is within reach. Students’ articulated concerns have to do with the likelihood of the long term pay off of a front loaded investment, yet, embedded within their coherent analysis of college investment are emotive questions about self and its position within a social community. Thus, risk encompasses more than financial liability.

College choice has historically been cast as individual activity affecting a coherent world—an individual exerts independence through the path she forges. The analysis presented here questions the assumptions of this approach to conceptualizing the college choice process. How a student accounts for events (and the attribution theories they come up with) is based not on some universal, overarching logic but on a context-specific logic, on the inherited sense making devices a community has used to make sense of its past and present.
In chapter two, one layer of context—the social environment and the personal identity that emerges from that environment—was shown to be an important frame of reference for an individual’s community college choice. This chapter examines another layer of context that is found to be important in the college choice process: high school college guidance. Specifically, it explores the approaches to college guidance experienced by students in four different high schools as they engaged in the process of planning, application, and decision making that culminates in college enrollment, and how students interpreted signals they received about their postsecondary options within these particular contexts. Thus, the goals of the chapter are twofold: First, to describe the orientations of college guidance experienced by student participants; and, second, to analyze the process by which students used to take up or filter out information and alternatives made evident to them by college guidance.

I argue that while a student’s racial and socioeconomic identity—formed through experiences within the family and local community—shape her subjective assessments of her chances for social mobility, schooling experiences and college guidance form the objective probabilities she considers in the college choice process. Research on high school effects on college enrollment indicate that academic curriculum and counseling programs facilitate successful transition to college, suggesting that formal school structures and normative orientation matter as much as individual characteristics (e.g., SES, race, etc.) do in affecting
students’ perception of college options and their preparation for college enrollment (e.g., Hill, 2008). School resource structures (such as curriculum and college advising) along with norms that are related to college going make up a school organization’s strategy through which the school shapes college enrollment. Hill’s (2008) examination of data from the High School Effectiveness Study finds that the strategies schools use to influence college enrollment are associated with variation in college enrollment, and that the strategies that limit a school’s capacity to act as a broker in the college-linking process fosters significant racial/ethnic variation in students’ college enrollment outcomes, though not socioeconomic variation.

This study extends this line of inquiry by investigating how students interacted with the college guidance approach experienced at four high schools. In this chapter I examine the ways students made sense of their college options—specifically their understanding of community college—within the contexts of two types of high school environments (small and large) and the resulting advising intensity (high and low). To do so, I analyze student thinking about the college search process they experienced during their senior year. Basically, students’ verbalization of perceived organizational norms and college linking practices is taken as a manifestation of a school organization’s strategy. Student dialogue, reflecting an individual’s bargaining among alternative conceptions, is assumed to reveal the sensemaking process wherein students’ prior conceptions relating to college interact with college guidance experiences in school.

Sensemaking is described by theorists as a process of making meaning that supports action. Coburn (2005) maintains that the meaning of events is not given but inherently problematic. To take action, people select information from the environment, then make meaning of that information. Chia (2000) similarly asserts that in the early stages of sensemaking, “phenomena have to be forcibly carved out of the undifferentiated flux of raw experience and
conceptually fixed and labeled so that they can [be used]” (p. 517). Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005) describe sensemaking as an act of organizing that occurs amidst a stream of potential antecedents and consequences; it starts with noticing and bracketing, then labeling and categorizing to stabilize the streaming of experience for functional deployment; it is retrospective, presumptive, social and systemic in nature; it is organizing that occurs in talk and action. They maintain that equivocality is the force behind the search for meaning: People make overt efforts at sensemaking whenever the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world. Yet, Gioia and Mehra (1996) remind us that “people’s sense can be modified in intricate ways out of awareness via assimilation of subtle cues over time” (p. 1229); and if sensemaking can be instigated by situations of anomalies and routines, the question remains—what is at the heart of sensemaking? Identity construction is seen by many to be one of the two basic processes that differentiate sensemaking from basic cognitive psychology (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld, 2005). Identity (who we think we are) shapes what we enact and how we interpret. The other process is the use of plausibility: Sensemaking isn’t about truth and getting it right. Instead, it is about continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more coherent, incorporates more of observed data, and is more resilient in the face of criticism (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld, 2005). Thus, in a given organizational context, our role (or, identity as perceived by ourselves and others) drives our sensemaking efforts, which ultimately work towards refining an ego-centric narrative that connects the threads of social life.

We know that student participants assess college options using their identity as a frame of reference when they construct plausible narratives around the questions of, what is the act of college-going? And, what should I do about it? In particular, for students who may be labeled at the margins socially or academically, the act of college-going is perceived as crossing symbolic
boundaries (i.e., moving up socially and economically). It is the interpretive systems underlying their institutional identity (we are what we are primarily because of the positions we occupy in society) and discursive identity (we are what we are primarily because of our individual accomplishments as they are interactionally recognized by others) that influence how they think about these questions (Gee, 2000). The interpretive systems may be the norms, traditions, and rules of institutions; it may be the discourse and dialogue of others; it may be people’s (historicized and socialized) views of a subject. Cultural ideas and norms operate as “categories of structure, thought, and action” (Vaughan, 1996, p.47).

The interpretive systems youths employ to make sense of college are inevitably shaped by their school contexts. High schools are now, more than ever, compelled to prepare students to transition to college. This is true for this study’s four high schools, though each takes a distinct approach that reflects their resource structures and normative orientation. Roosevelt High used tactics that suggest the school employs a strategy similar to what Hill (2008) calls the traditional approach—one that is characterized by limited resource capacity and limited organizational commitment to facilitating access to available resources among students and their families. The traditional strategy is traditional in that it represents an approach to preparing students to navigate the college linking process that is more consistent with the role that high schools traditionally played through much of the 20th century—as a link to the labor market for the majority of students and as a channel to college for a much smaller segment of the student population (Hill, 2008). Another school, Washington High, used tactics that suggest the school employs an approach that is characterized by a relatively solid resource structure for college planning but a limited commitment to ensuring equitable distribution of resources to help all students and their families navigate the college-linking process. Resources are there for college
planning, but the strategy the school employs—which we will call batch processing—assumes students should take initiative to obtain tailored guidance. Finally, Wilson and Lincoln High employ methods that indicate they use a brokering strategy—characterized by evident organizational commitment to assisting students and their families to accessing college planning resources. The first two college guidance strategies, traditional and batch processing, assume the responsibility for gaining access to college resources lies more with the student while the latter strategy, brokering, assumes the responsibility for distributing college resources lies more with the school.

The schools’ targets of guidance can be viewed as falling into three areas: information, experiential learning and personal support. Information-oriented guidance includes methods such as presentations, campus tours, brochures, and other kinds of information dissemination that assist students in constructing a road map of a given postsecondary system, academic requirements for admittance, institution-specific characteristics (e.g., demographics), and other general information. Guidance targeting experiential learning focuses on teaching students practices and understandings that college-ready high school students employ to activate the college search and choice process. Such methods include college tours that aim to acclimatize students to ways of life on college campuses (not just offer information), financial aid workshops, and college application workshops. These processes aim to teach students to enact procedures required to successfully transition over to college. Experiential learning differs from information-oriented methods in that it targets learning through doing (enactment). Personal support refers to guidance that is more tailored and intense compared to the batch processing and traditional approaches. Such guidance often takes place through teacher-student relationships (but also other types of relationships such as peer mentors), and targets the specific needs of
individual students. For many of the participants in this study, personal support addresses students’ doubt about going to college, which can range from academic confidence to social anxiety. An example of a personal support guidance technique is the alumni socials that afford high school students interactions with high school alumni who have graduated and are college students. Note that the three categories are not completely distinct categories but interrelate in important ways. They are presented as distinct categories here in order to focus our attention on particular outcomes of college guidance. Table 3.1 summarizes the college guidance strategy attributed to each high school, the targets of guidance, and the assumption about where the responsibility for accessing college resources lies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School</th>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Guidance Strategy</th>
<th>Targets of Guidance</th>
<th>Agency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roosevelt n = 12</td>
<td>Comprehensive school</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Agency lies with student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington n = 13&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Comprehensive school</td>
<td>Batch Processing</td>
<td>Information Experiential learning</td>
<td>Agency lies with student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln n = 4</td>
<td>Continuation school</td>
<td>Brokering</td>
<td>Information Experiential learning Personal support</td>
<td>Agency lies with school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson n = 10</td>
<td>Community of small Schools</td>
<td>Brokering</td>
<td>Information Experiential learning Personal support</td>
<td>Agency lies with school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While a variety of sources from the high school context shape students’ sensemaking about college, the above strategies are the focus of this chapter’s analysis of environmental conditions that potentially influence student thinking about college enrollment. Driving the

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<sup>1</sup> One student, Ella, is excluded from the Washington group because unlike the other thirteen, she attended one of the new small schools that the administration added to the original comprehensive school. Though she is technically a Washington student, her membership in the small school gave her college guidance experiences that were reported to be more similar to students who attended the small schools rather than those who attended the comprehensive.
analysis is the question, when do students accept and incorporate high school guidance into their college choice process? A rational perspective of decision-making predicts that students would use all relevant information given by school agents, who are assumed to understand and act in students’ best interests. Yet, we know from the previous chapter that frames of reference influence what environmental stimuli people will pay attention to. A useful approach to this analysis is to ask what types of school guidance stimulate ‘non-routine’ student decision making, which March (1994) describes as decision-making that deviates from what was previously learned as an appropriate response for a type of environmental stimulus. A ‘routinized’ response, on the other hand, is a response that was learned at some previous time as an appropriate response for a particular stimulus. ‘Non-routine’ decision making involves a larger or smaller amount of problem-solving activity directed at finding ways of performing, whereas routinized responses are behaviors that can be called forth almost instantaneously because they are responses that have been previously developed and do not involve problem-solving that entail search for alternative actions or inventing new types of behavior altogether. These two types of decision-making are represented as extreme ends of a continuum of responses to environmental stimuli.

Given that most research participants in this study are low income minority youths who do not come from a family history of baccalaureate achievement, looking ahead to attaining a baccalaureate, then, should not bring forth the type of response which March calls a routinized performance. These students are, rather, in the process of learning what behaviors are involved in becoming college-ready. But do students and high school agents perceive the transition to community college as an event that requires preparation or non-routine responses from students? In the following sections, I analyze how students, many of whom have relatively weak academic
histories, respond to college guidance for community college enrollment. What aspects of guidance do they pay attention to and incorporate into their planning? What alternative actions do they consider in their sensemaking of their college options? And, when do students make non-routine decisions?

**High school contexts**

The four high schools research participants enrolled in are organized differently. Washington and Roosevelt are large comprehensive high schools, Wilson is a small community of schools, and Lincoln is a small continuation school. Of the two large schools, Roosevelt is organized as a traditional comprehensive school. Washington re-organized part of its campus (in the 2004-05 academic year, when participants were sophomores) to create four small schools, while maintaining its comprehensive school. Students were given the choice of either migrating to one of the four small schools or stay in the comprehensive. In the 2005-06, Wilson broke up into a small community of schools organized around themes. The students recruited for this study are from the small school focused on the arts. Lastly, in 2006-07 academic year when students were recruited for this study, Lincoln was still an extension of Washington High, though they carried different names. Lincoln is the continuation school where students considered at-risk of not graduating with their cohort were sent.

The organization and size of the schools appear to affect college linking strategies utilized. Services at large comprehensive schools appear to rely on methods of information dissemination that can accommodate large numbers of students. On the other hand, personal support tactics that employ close teacher-student relationships are more likely to emerge in small school environments. Table 3.2 below maps the each school’s overall guidance strategy with the specific college supports students report receiving.
Table 3.2: High school college guidance strategy and attendant college supports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Guidance Strategy</th>
<th>College Supports</th>
<th>Students Receive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roosevelt (Comprehensive)</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Counseling office&lt;br&gt;College fairs &amp; assemblies&lt;br&gt;Class presentations&lt;br&gt;Ad-hoc teacher-led supports</td>
<td>Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington (Comprehensive)</td>
<td>Batch Processing</td>
<td>Counseling office&lt;br&gt;College fairs&lt;br&gt;Class presentations&lt;br&gt;College/career center&lt;br&gt;Informational workshops&lt;br&gt;College transition courses&lt;br&gt;Trips to college campuses</td>
<td>Information&lt;br&gt;Experiential learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln (Continuation school)</td>
<td>Brokering</td>
<td>Counseling office&lt;br&gt;College fairs&lt;br&gt;Financial aid workshops&lt;br&gt;Trips to college campuses&lt;br&gt;Teacher-student relations*</td>
<td>Information&lt;br&gt;Experiential learning&lt;br&gt;Personal support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson (Small schools)</td>
<td>Brokering</td>
<td>Counseling office&lt;br&gt;College fairs&lt;br&gt;College/career center&lt;br&gt;Informational workshops&lt;br&gt;Financial aid workshops&lt;br&gt;Alumni social events&lt;br&gt;Trips to college campuses&lt;br&gt;Teacher-student relations</td>
<td>Information&lt;br&gt;Experiential learning&lt;br&gt;Personal support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Close teacher-student relations can occur in any high school, but students who attend small schools report these relationships in the context of college planning.

**Roosevelt High**

At Roosevelt High, the college supports offered to assist students in preparing to transition to postsecondary institutions were primarily found in college fairs or assemblies where representatives from colleges come to speak, class presentations made by college representatives and academic counselors, and one-on-one short sessions with counselors that occurred usually during the fall semester of senior year. The one-on-one college sessions with counselors generally happen once a year, unless the student initiates more contact with the counselor. While a few small scale programs (after school tutoring and mentoring; themed cohort-based learning;
career internships) at this comprehensive high school offered some limited assistance for college guidance, their program goals (when participants were seniors) were not focused on college assistance per se. Some individual program leaders chose to embed college guidance in parts of the program curriculum. Thus, based on students’ reports of their college support experiences, the school’s college-linking strategy is considered traditional—resources are relatively limited and the school organization does not function as a broker to effectively assist all their students in making the transition to postsecondary institutions.

**Washington High**

The college supports for the students enrolled in the comprehensive school at Washington were similar to those of Roosevelt² in the focus on information dissemination. In addition to one-on-one short sessions with counselors, college fairs, and class presentations made by college representatives and counselors, Washington also offered its comprehensive school students a college/career center devoted specifically to college guidance. The college/career center afforded students a central place where additional resources can be found for students who seek out more specific supports. Beyond information-oriented methods, the school also offered experiential learning through guided trips to various college campuses (in and out of state) and various workshops such as financial aid application. But these supports, like the resources at college and career center, are usually accessed by students who initiate the search for them. Some of the experiential or process-focused guidance, including college preparation courses (e.g., college transition courses focused on college and financial aid applications and community college enrollment process) and demographic specific workshops (e.g., scholarship/informational workshops for AB 540/undocumented students), were reported to be only available to certain

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² Thirteen of the fourteen research participants were enrolled in the comprehensive school at Washington. One student, Ella, was enrolled in a small school at Washington.
demographic groups (e.g., those enrolled in ESL programs). The distribution of resources at Washington comprehensive during the time participants were enrolled was such that it was not always apparent to students what was available to them. Thus, the overall strategy of the comprehensive school is considered batch processing, where students are prepared to think about college through methods that can serve a large number of students. From the variety of college services students described receiving, it is clear that Washington’s comprehensive school has more resources to create more of and a variety of college support services, as compared to Roosevelt. But, the services for Washington’s comprehensive school students, like Roosevelt, appear to rely on methods that are non-intensive and not tailored to specific individual needs. Unless students initiate a search for optional resources, they will not receive additional supports that they might need. In this way, Washington does not act as a broker to ensure equal distribution of resources for all of its students.

**Lincoln High**

College supports at Lincoln and Wilson High are viewed by students as more oriented towards teaching processes and motivation-building. At Lincoln, a small continuation school that shared some college resources with Washington High, participants reported services geared towards moving them to college came in a few forms. The school did not offer class presentations, informational workshops beyond financial aid assistance, or a career center. Students were encouraged to attend the college fairs and organized college trips made available on the Washington campus, and were given more tailored assistance through Lincoln counselors and other staff. Because their student population is much smaller and less diverse compared to Washington, counselors, teachers, and even administers were able to have relationships with students so that formal information dissemination methods used by the large schools appear to be
less necessary. In other words, personal relationships between institutional agents and students substitute for more formal channels of information. Moreover, since students at Lincoln have a history of academic difficulty in school, college information may be more digestible through personal channels that involve trust. Lincoln High clearly acts as a broker to assist their students in accessing resources for community college.

**Wilson High**

Like Lincoln, there is greater interpersonal interaction at Wilson High between teachers and students, compared to the comprehensive schools. In addition to information-dissemination methods (such as college fairs, a college/career center, themed presentations) and process guidance (such as financial aid workshops and organized college trips) focused on giving students hands-on experiential learning, Wilson also promoted close relationships between faculty and seniors to improve student achievement (i.e., high school graduation and possibly college enrollment). Unlike Lincoln, Wilson is not a continuation school but a neighborhood high school. Along with the structural reorganization of the school into a community of three small schools in 2004-05 (when participants were sophomores), there came a focus on giving seniors extra individual attention, as reported by student participants. Wilson is seen as acting as a broker for their students by employing methods that address students’ informational, experiential, and personal (or, motivational) needs. I address this finding in the next section.

**Small schools and high-intensity guidance through multiple targets**

We can make several inferences from students’ experiences of the college guidance provided at the four schools. The college guidance approach taken in the small school environments can be described as “intrusive”, wherein the school acts to facilitate greater access to resources for students. At Wilson High, in addition to information-oriented methods (e.g.,
college fairs and informational workshops), a constellation of other forms of guidance that are focused on motivation-building and the college search and application process were offered. From Table 3.2, we can see that the range of college supports available at Wilson High when participants were enrolled covered multiple targets—information, experiential learning, and personal/individualized support. College fairs, the career center, and informational workshops focus on giving students new information. Financial aid workshops and guided trips to college campuses are examples of guidance that help students learn by doing (e.g., complex paperwork) and acclimate by doing (e.g., being part of campus life). Teacher-student relationships meanwhile is a tactic that affords more individualized attention to students’ needs. In the provision of these forms of guidance, the school expressed an organizational commitment to increase students’ access to college resources through the multiple guidance targets. Some methods teach students to enact their new found college knowledge and other methods focus on getting students to believe that they are a good fit with postsecondary institutions. Information about college isn’t assumed to be sufficient for helping students make the transition to college. Similarly, Lincoln students experienced more intensive guidance through teacher (or staff)-student relationships, even though they did not have the range of college supports Wilson High students had. Their students were offered guidance in all three target areas, but since the students who attended the continuation school were considered at risk, the primary goal was high school graduation.

Beyond a description of the schools’ overall college-linking strategy, of greater interest to this study is how did students perceive and react to the guidance tactics. Students at the small schools report their relationships with teachers and other institutional agents as an important source of college guidance. In contrast to students who attended the large comprehensive schools
(n=25), students in the small schools (n=15³) tend to volunteer information about their relationships with institutional agents (either teachers or counselors or both) during interviews about their college choice process. Four-fifths (or 80%) of small school youths voluntarily attribute at least part of their motivation to move forward with college to feedback from teachers and/or counselors. While workshops that focus on the process of filing applications or conducting college searches (socializing students to perform new knowledge) were reported by students as useful and important, relationships that work to motivate students or give them individual support were perceived as equally important to get students to think about what may or may not be appropriate endeavors to engage in.

Ellen, a low-income African-American student from Wilson High, is an example of a student whose decision to enroll in college immediately after high school had been impacted by teachers' expressed view of her academic potential:

Ellen: Well, I mean I always thought about [college] but it really just came like this year when I saw my grades go up, so I was like I can go—really go to college! I thought I just messed up to where I couldn’t go to a state [college]…Like talking to teachers and just people telling me that I don’t know—school--a money thing too. Like financial aid, you get money to go to school. But that I was smart and that I could go to school. I didn’t—I mean, I wanted to go to school but I wasn’t going to go straight out of high school. I was going to wait a year but they said it’s not good to wait a year cause sometimes you don’t go back.

In Ellen’s response to the question of when she first seriously started thinking about enrolling in college, we find that institutional assessment of her academic potential (in the forms of grades and informal teacher feedback) makes the difference between not starting the college choice process—delaying it a year or so after graduation she says—and starting it during high school.

More than half of the research participants are like Ellen in terms of academic profile. They can get by well enough to graduate high school but not well enough to necessarily consider

³ This number includes one student, Ella, who attended a small school on the Washington campus.
themselves college material. This “middling” high school group is often overlooked by school personnel, likely because they are not in dire need of help nor are they distinctive in their achievement. Yet, they report needing positive feedback about their academic potential to move forward. Damon describes how he first started thinking about preparing to enroll in college:

Damon: I say about two years ago, I went to, um, [a] college fair and like there was opportunities, like, they, you know, got to me. ‘Oh you can do this and this. Oh you gonna be great.’ And I was like I’m really going to do this, I’m going to college and make something of my life and like not be on the street corner, like doing nothing.

Damon, who is not from a small school, eventually found the kind of feedback from a school agent he needed to hear to commit himself to the idea that he would aim for college. He describes his prior academic achievement as C average and admits that he and his friends dislike the processes within the classroom. It wasn’t until his junior year English teacher suggest he join a program that facilitates students’ participation in college events—and where he encountered the above college representative—that he changed his mind about community college enrollment—a prospect he describes as anxiety inducing because academic failure is a very real possibility.

Feedback from school representatives may be powerful in the sense that these adults may be considered specialists who theoretically should know who could do well in school and college. What is at stake are students’ perception of themselves as a kind of member within education institutions. The interpretations employed in their view of their academic identities can be observed in the two brief statements given by Ellen and Damon. Ellen says she has always thought about college, then indicates why she does not consider herself a college student: “But…I thought I just messed up to where I couldn’t go to a state [college].” She observes her academic performance, as signified by grades, as she thinks about college. The consideration of
college triggers her thoughts about her academic identity (i.e., who she thinks she is as judged by others in school). And part of identity is performance within an institutional context. In the school context, classroom performance situates students into social categories as recognized by others. Damon’s admission that his average of C grades in high school came along with his sense that school does not suit him, that he will try to just graduate and get a job somewhere. In his reflection, we can hypothesize that his social label of being a C student lends to his belief that school does not fit him well.

The small schools in this research sample indicate they recognize the role personal relationships can have on students’ attachment to the organization. At Wilson High, students observed changes made starting their junior year when the school was reorganized into three small schools. Ellen explains, “It just seems like since the school got broken up smaller, it’s like the teachers care. You get more one-on-one contact.” Another youth from Wilson, Netta, similarly observes: “I don’t know if it's because the senior teachers really connect with the seniors because they want you to graduate or what, but I just noticed that back when I was like in ninth grade I didn't have no real connection to my teachers to where I really just felt like my teachers really really cared.” She intuits that the change in teachers’ effort to create a bond with students come during a crucial time in high school when youths are more likely to leave high school without graduating—an event that undermines the legitimacy of the organization. The connection these students are referring to come in the form of teacher-initiated conversations, whether it be about the student’s academic work or personal life. What significance do students perceive in the teacher-student relationships? Netta observes, “I need to be able to relate to my teacher and be able to, um, feel comfortable asking them for help…[Otherwise] if I couldn’t figure out somethin’ I just leave it alone or somethin’.” Here, she indicates that her self-esteem is
at risk in the education process, and the role faculty can play in preserving esteem during moments when students’ sense of self are at risk. The significance of her statement is that the learning process is relatively more risky for disadvantaged youths who have experienced more instances of failure—be it in the learning process or social interactions at school. Teacher initiated relationships potentially afford trust, a socio-emotion necessary for these students to continue their commitment as members of the school organization.

The previous chapter established participants’ acceptance of the ideology that education is a solution to their problems. For low income and other disadvantaged youths, then, the problem lies in their position within education institutions. Accumulated academic failure (that appears in various forms—low grades, negative relations with teachers, low social positioning within the school community) culminates in an academic self-concept that complicates their acceptance of the ideology of education. How then can at-risk students come to trust school representatives who are the ones carrying out educational processes that marginalizes them? The interpretive schemes that underlie students’ institutional identities operate by consensus: In enforcing norms and standards, school agents must create belief in the legitimacy of their actions and the ideals of the organization, and students, at their end, either accept (to a greater or lesser degree) the criteria established to define membership within the organization or depart.

The teacher relationships small school students discuss appear to bond students to their school via access to more resources, that can take the forms of teacher assistance, positive social recognition, and relevant information. The micro-level interactions described by Netta (above) provides an illustration of how seniors at Wilson High benefited from close relationships with teachers and staff. She felt more comfortable with teachers who showed caring and this comfort
in turn allowed her to ask for help when she needed it. Obtaining additional resources through school relationships appear to bolster her trust in the staff.

If we assume that academic performance cannot be divorced from students’ personal lives and immediate community context, then disadvantaged youths are more likely to run into complications at school. Connie illustrates the lives of students who live with challenges, both in and outside of school. The challenges they bring into school tests school norms and the relationships they have with school agents. Connie explains why she must feel trust in school agents to even begin the (necessarily collaborative) learning process:

Connie: You have to understand, every year we have different teachers…How do you all expect us to give you respect when you’re not even out for our best interest at heart? Every year we get a new teacher, how are you all expecting for us to communicate with this person or get along with this person and we don’t know them. It’s like you’re a stranger, you’re not from my neighborhood…Then after we give [the teachers] a hard time we finally get to know them they snatch them away from us. So it’s like we need a partnership…Oakland school teachers are more than teachers, they are our parents, they are safety nets. You know teachers that I grew up with is like more than they have to be…We have teachers here that if you don’t have lunch one day and you need lunch money they’ll buy you lunch…We need someone that we can depend on…especially kids from Oakland, especially if you live in the environment I live in. You walk up to me I don’t know you, I don’t trust you. My guard is up for a reason. There have been a lot of us who have been hurt from everybody, from mothers, fathers, grandmothers, so how do I know you’re different? How do I know you’re not going to do the same thing to me everybody else did to me? It’s like more about trust.

There are two important observations to be made about Connie’s statement. The first is the importance of context-specific knowledge—understanding of the history of a community, the everyday experiences of locals, the particular needs of youths. Second, teachers who do not learn about the local community cannot effectively meet the needs of their students, and they, in turn, do not trust their instructors who do not care enough to learn.
Participants belonging to the small schools are more advantaged than their peers in large comprehensive schools in that the small schools act to negotiate greater access to college support resources across groups of students. Greater teacher attention facilitates awareness and utilization of college resources available. Let’s take a look at the ways students perceive and respond to the college-linking strategy of small schools. Table 3.3 summarizes each school’s methods and the effects reported by students.

**Table 3.3: Student perception of and reaction to guidance methods**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School</th>
<th>College Supports</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Reported Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Washington (small school) | Counseling office  
College fairs  
Class presentations  
College/career center  
Informational workshops  
Trips to college campuses  
Teacher-student relations | n = 1    | *Access to more info  
*Utilization of info  
*Consideration of alternatives  
*Acceptance of guidance |
| Lincoln (Continuation school) | Counseling office  
College fairs/ assemblies  
Financial aid workshops  
Trips to college campuses  
Teacher-student relations | n = 4    | *Access to more info  
*Utilization of info  
*Consideration of alternatives  
*Acceptance of guidance |
| Wilson (Small school) | Counseling office  
College fairs/ assemblies  
College/career center  
Informational workshops  
Financial aid workshops  
Alumni presentations  
Trips to college campuses  
Teacher-student relations | n = 10   | *Access to more info  
*Utilization of info  
*Consideration of alternatives  
*Limited acceptance of guidance |

Each of the small schools employ methods that offer students information, experiential learning and individual support to complete the college transition process (as outlined in Table 2). What students report experiencing (summarized in the last column in Table 3) is accessing additional college information, utilizing the information and other support services, considering various educational pathways, and making room for school guidance in their decision-making and behavior (to a greater or lesser extent).
What appears to take place prior to these effects, based on student reports, is the relationships that increase the likelihood students use school resources. The caring and encouragement that Ellen, Netta, and Connie cite are experiences small school students report to be important in their movement towards enrolling in college. The trust developed in closer teacher\textsuperscript{4}-student relationships create the conditions for students (especially for the disadvantaged) to utilize resources and consider alternative educational pathways. Participants from large comprehensive and small schools report they will not use resources under certain conditions, even when they know of their availability. (This issue will also be taken up in the next section.) How does trust in institutional relationships work to direct students’ attention and motivation?

Small schools’ ability to address a broader layer of risk beyond classroom walls through closer relationships between faculty and students appear to be a key contributing factor in the change process. The relationships at work in these schools address social status as another layer of risk. Status, a broad and difficult concept to pinpoint in research, can be, however, investigated through everyday lived experiences such as academic history in secondary school, perception of self through observations of surrounding environment, and knowledge of or orientations toward postsecondary education and potential vocations. Changing the beliefs about self appears to underlie the efforts at Wilson and Lincoln High. Their students indicate that they have always thought that they ought to go to college, that college is necessary now, but they have also hesitated about enrolling immediately after high school, or about whether they could really make it at a four-year college eventually. So, while information- and process-oriented guidance is very important in contributing to students’ college knowledge and ability to formulate a more

\textsuperscript{4} It could also be relationships between students and counselors or other administrators, though it is more likely to be between teachers and students because they spend the most time together during the school day.
concrete postsecondary vision for themselves, students at small schools report teachers’ feedback about their potential and possibilities as a key starting point.

Ella, a senior from one of Washington’s small schools, maintains that teachers and staff at her school make the difference between her enrolling or not enrolling in college after high school. As an undocumented student, she knows that her opportunities are limited, and that four-year colleges are out of reach due to cost and almost non-existent financial aid for youths like herself. Her status stymied her desire to look into her future. Close teacher guidance eventually directed her attention to these resources and enabled her to allow the possibility she could be a college student too. The informational workshops arranged for AB540 students changed her mind about enrolling in community college. She maintains, “Like they really like went out of the way to like have us come to meetings or have people from [University] come and talk to us to have workshops on like financial aid... and because of them it's that like a lot of us got to apply to college and got to apply for scholarships.” Information given directly from university representatives and those who work with students in her situation expanded her understanding of the postsecondary and policy landscape, helping her predict her future. Thus, the meaning Ella made of college-going and her student identity were co-constructed by multiple parties. (It is not an individual act of cognition.)

Ella: I will say that in my Academy we are really close with all the teachers so it's like more than a teacher relationship, it's like a friendship. Like we're really close and everything. And like- so yeah, we talk to them about like, oh, what's our plan and then- and they advise us. You know, like, oh well, this will be better for you. ‘Cause they really know us...So they really guide us through the process and everything...Um, well they really like pushed us through applying... Even like-some of us [who] were not even thinking we're going to college. And they...were like, no, apply. There's scholarships...Well for me like my teachers know my situation in this country, so...they're always giving us like hope on, well you know, like you can still go to school, you know. We know that it's hard...[but] you could still do it. And so they really like give us like that, that push that we need to go.
What is important to note about Ella’s statement is her emphasis on relationship building that leads to guidance. In her relationship with her teachers, she shares information about herself—her undocumented status, her concerns, her plans—and they, in turn, advise keeping in mind what they know about her. Advice is built on not only knowledge of a target goal but also of the individual’s needs and circumstances.

In Ella’s case, her teachers were able to disrupt her thinking about her circumstance with their advocacy for what may be appropriate and feasible action. Such action is appropriate for the person they saw that Ella didn’t see in herself⁵. However, this approach does not work when school agents offer advice that does not fit with students’ understanding. To disrupt typical interpretation of an institutional or discursive identity, new information must fit within the individual’s existing cognitive frameworks. Information that conflicts with knowledge in a person’s schemas will either be ignored as an aberration, recast to fit current schemas, or generate either schema modification or the addition of a sub-category schema (Lord and Foti, 1986, as cited in Harris, 1994).

Let’s return to a statement made by a student from Wilson High (given in the previous chapter) to illustrate when action aimed at disrupting students’ interpretive processes does not work. Netta, a student who reports being strong in academics, ultimately ignored teachers’ suggestion that she go to a four-year college. The information she received from faculty were inconsistent with other data, and their account of reality was finally judged implausible.

Netta: The reason why I [choose community college] is because it's a lot cheaper and plus because I was thinking...some people I know too like they, um, went straight to a four year and then they, um, it was a little bit overwhelming. It wasn't enough financial aid...sometimes they'd run out of it so then they'll go back to a community college and they'll just start over from there. Yeah, I don't want, I don't

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⁵ Mead (1934) noted that much of what an individual comes to define as self is a reflection of reactions of others to the individual.
want that to happen to me…When I was in ninth grade sometimes [graduates from our high school] come back and they tell about their experiences…They just had to work…it was just too much, it was too much. Plus [four-year college] I think too, it’s a lot more difficult…Um [teachers and counselors], they all actually encouraged me to go to, um, the four year. But, I'm not gonna listen. I mean, I'll listen to 'em but I'm not gonna let them, um, let them talk me into going to a four year school first thing right after high school. I tell them I wanna get more prepared, but they get mad and say my grades show that it’s not I'm not prepared. But I just-, I wanna-, I don't want that same experience to happen to me, what happened to everybody else.

In the novel situation of envisioning herself in a four-year college, Netta pieced together teachers’ advice with information from older peers. Sense-making, as Weick et al (2005) suggest, is more apparent when an individual is faced with situations involving a sense of loss or unfamiliar contexts where sense is elusive. In the above statement, Netta remembered stories told by people she knew from her neighborhood, and these stories resurfaced in her mind when her teachers pressed her to consider going to a four-year college. The people she knew are part of her social world—they are like her in terms of ascribed characteristics, and they are alike in that they also took action to become socially mobile through a postsecondary pathway. Their stories of unsuccessful attempts at four-year colleges straight out of high school are more deeply etched into her worldview, likely because aspects of their stories are consistent with other data she observed over time. What is ironic about Wilson High’s efforts at changing students’ perception of themselves is that one of their methods, the alumni events, further reinforces for Netta her belief that people like herself have a better chance at achieving a baccalaureate through the community college route. While Wilson High uses the brokering strategy to improve college-going rates, they do not provide adequate academic support for students, and students report that they are aware of this. Thus, Netta filtered out college choices that are perceived as too discordant with her understanding of the world and her current circumstance. An important idea to be taken away from this example is that students do not perceive college guidance as objective
advice giving; they intuit that what school agents tell their students are motivated by interests or particular lived experiences (which can differ greatly from students’ if that person’s demographics contrast sharply with the population they are in charge of) that produce a particular story they retell to their students.

**Comprehensive schools and low-intensity guidance**

Meanwhile, students from large comprehensive schools tend to foreground personal circumstances or college transfer strategies, rather than school relationships, in their discussions of college choice. Eight out of twenty-five (or 32%) bring up relationships with faculty or counselors during interviews about college choice. Of that number, only three (or 12%) characterize the help from institutional agents as significant. Among these three, two belong to confined English Language Learner programs (that are small) in which students are able to receive guidance from counselors assigned specifically to EL learners and are eligible to participate in EL-targeted college support services.

Unlike the multi-target relationship-based strategy employed by small schools, the common strategies employed by comprehensives focus on disseminating information students need to navigate the college choice process. The inference that can be made about the large comprehensive schools (Roosevelt and Washington) is that the approach taken to college guidance is information-centered, wherein the school does not act as a broker to increase utilization of resources. Class presentations, the form of guidance received by all student participants from the two schools, is one of the most efficient ways of conveying information about college to a large number of students. Students attending Washington and Roosevelt, nearly all of whom are comprehensive students, report this college guidance form to be their only or primary source of college guidance. Class presentations generally focus on information about
the three public tiers of postsecondary systems in California, the admissions processes/requirements, and the financial aid process. When the presentations were given by specific colleges, the information was focused on the college itself. When school counselors gave the presentation, the information centered on California’s public institutions (U.C., CSU, and California community colleges).

Participants from the comprehensive school with weak college guidance (Roosevelt) tend to foreground personal circumstances in their discussion of their college choice, whereas those from a stronger college-going environment (Washington) focus on college transfer strategies. Roosevelt, a comprehensive with a high ratio of students to counselor and no other significant source of support for college guidance, relies heavily on class presentations and one-on-one sessions with an academic counselor to disseminate information about college to students. The class presentations target older classmen (juniors and seniors) and the one-on-one session focus on seniors during their fall semester. Students from Roosevelt report they received both information about California’s institutions and the financial aid process from the presentations and specific college details from local colleges that made visits to the school. However, not all participants reported attending the scheduled one-on-one session with the academic counselor to discuss college, as a few students did not view college as feasible in the near future.

Roosevelt students typically narrate their college choice along the lines of personal circumstances and local college norms, framing their college choice within the arrangements of family, the confines of neighborhood, and known postsecondary pathways. Erin, Jarvis, Emme, and Tavis are typical of students who make their college choice primarily on such conditions and a generic understanding of public two-year colleges.
Erin, who report enjoying school and learning, explains that she decided to enroll in the local college her brother attends because: “I need to save [money] and two, get some college experience…It would be hard to adjust to so many things if I went straight to a four-year…Plus my brother says it’s a good school and he’s there.” Prior to this statement, she indicated surprise when asked whether she considered other options, such as various forms of college aid or four-year colleges that offer composite financial aid packages.

Jarvis and Emme, both second generation immigrant students, also make the choice for local colleges to be close to family or what is familiar to family members. As the oldest child in his family, Jarvis takes the route that would allow him to contribute financially to his family. He reasons that the local college is a good option because “it’s cheaper…I have to have two years of general education [and those two years] is cheaper right there. I still want to join the Navy [but] I think I have a better way of helping my family…I decided to stay and work for the summer and then study during fall and work at night.” In his statement, Jarvis indicates that enrolling in a local college allows him to work to help with family expenses. In contrast, Emme, who is the youngest child in her family, does not need to work to support them. Nonetheless, she prefers a local state college that is “somewhere around my-around where I live at…I really wanna go-I don’t know, it’s just that East State College, one of my cousins lived up by there and I always would see the school…and just for the fact that it’s closer to my house. I don’t like to go really far.” Her second choice is a place that a family member has experience with: “Chester State…[another] cousin used to go there and he always told me that it was a good school.”

Tavis, a first generation immigrant youth, decides to stay at home during college as well, though not only to support family but also for reasons relating to culture shock. While he also needs to work to assist his family, he foregrounds the stress of learning a new way of life or
cultural norms: I have a job at AMC…I could continue working there if I go to the community college…I really am trying to help pay the bills…If I go [far away] they’ll have a different system of doing things and I’m not sure if I can handle that…I’m scared of—it’s just like the way people act here.” Tavis recounts the shock and abuse he experienced after moving to the U.S. from Peru at the age of twelve and the academic troubles he attributes to the time it took to adjust to a new language and way of life.

Erin, Jarvis, Emme, and Tavis report having obtained college information from Roosevelt High, but their discussions of their college choice process foreground not what they have learned about California colleges or financial aid, but needs relating to family or personal circumstances, norms of college going within their family, and conceptions of two-year colleges. I would argue that while the majority of Roosevelt students (9 out of 11) did not discuss college guidance at their school beyond the perfunctory response to interview questions, the types of guidance offered—low-intensity, low contact and information-centered guidance—appear to encourage students to rely on their own informational search skills, generic conceptions about college, and personal/family circumstance as guides for college decision-making.

The low-intensity, low contact, and information-centered guidance leave students with some information but does not encourage them to seek out further contact with guidance counselors or college representatives since that information source is not easily accessible. All students report receiving information from class presentations, yet only some students (5 out of 11) report receiving information through college fairs or college counselors, sources which require voluntary participation on the student's part. Erin says that she had received some information from her counselor (through the one-on-one session scheduled fall of senior year), but she usually she approaches her teachers with additional college questions—“[because] my
counselor just has too many students.” Jarvis attended the one-on-one session with his counselor during fall semester, from which he received some pamphlets and a brief overview of the local colleges he indicated interest in, but nothing more. “My counselor asked me if I had questions,” he maintains, “but I didn’t really know what to ask him…I didn’t know what I was supposed to know. So the [appointment] ended pretty right after.”

Erin, Jarvis, Emme, and Tavis are among those students from Roosevelt who had already made up their minds by senior year about which colleges they would apply to or enroll in. Not receiving more guidance, then, left them with their pre-conceived views intact. The information that students (whose primary source of college guidance come in the form of class presentations) focus on are the hierarchy of California colleges, the grade and test score requirements of each college sector (University of California versus State Universities versus community colleges), and the general cost of the three types of colleges. Such information is the generic sort and the sort that make up the objective probabilities students consider, not their subjective considerations. The four students—Erin, Jarvis, Emme, and Tavis—set out to enroll in their first choice institutions (community college) based on considerations of their limited financial means and social affiliations.

Students who were less certain about postsecondary plans in senior year illustrate the dilemmas of the low-intensity, low contact guidance approach more plainly. Quin, a student described in the previous chapter, is someone who reports being capable of entering and taking coursework at a four-year college, yet is pulled in other directions due to his personal circumstances and spotty postsecondary guidance. He describes his college decision-making as meeting his family’s needs within the context of financial constraints. In his senior year, he

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6 As noted earlier, academic experiences and such minimal kind of college guidance (composed mainly of information dissemination) together form the objective criteria that students use to interpret their circumstance and anticipate the steps in the college enrollment process.
explored several options—four-year state colleges and universities, art colleges, community colleges, and the Marines. Though he had a very low GPA (1.0-2.0), due to personal troubles, his first two years in high school, by senior year he made a big leap in terms of grades. He consciously decided not to utilize counseling services, only the basic information passed out in handouts during class presentations. He would “go to a couple of the teachers for help but never the counselors, most of the time, they’re too busy or they’re out…and [students] can’t get out of class to go to counselors during the day."

The pattern of foregrounding personal/family needs and personal conceptions of college can be clearly seen in Quin’s discussion of his postsecondary choice process. But, it would be a mistake to believe that students such as Quin are not rational in their decision-making. I would argue that the low academic rigor at Roosevelt is at the heart of students’ fears about college and their decision-making about whether and which kinds of colleges and financial aid forms to consider. The low-intensity, low contact, and information-centered guidance adds another contextual layer to their college choice process, its weak force, ironically, intensifying anxiety youths may have about themselves and their futures, and pushing them towards more secure, or known, pathways.

At Washington High, students’ perception of their high school’s college guidance structure overlaps to some degree with students at Roosevelt High. Students enrolled in Washington’s comprehensive school (n = 13) report that they obtained college guidance

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7 He suggests in his interview that his counselor did not demonstrate much of a willingness to help students, so he never sought them out. Teachers, on the other hand, are more accessible since they see students every day—even if they do not hold specialized knowledge to perform college guidance. We can infer from Quin’s discussion of his college search process that though he has the informational literacy skills to do a search with only spare handouts as guide, and presents his decision-making as coolly rational, he needed signs of caring to utilize school counseling. That he needs empathic institutional agents should not be surprising. The decision he is making is not just a cool cost benefit analysis—it involves personally difficult issues requiring moral reasoning. It would not be reasonable to expect a vulnerable youth to seek out the advice of a school agent who does not or cannot make stronger connections with youths in their care.
primarily in the form of class presentations. While they all received key information about the
three tiers of public postsecondary systems in California and financial aid application process
through these presentations, and were aware of the availability of the college/career center, there
existed great variety in terms of what information and guidance sources were relied on during the
college choice process. Four of the student participants (mostly Asian Americans) relied
primarily on their peer networks for college guidance, three relied on a mix of institutional and
peer guidance, three (Latinos) relied mostly on institutional agents, and three (African
Americans) based their choices on personal circumstances and generic conceptions of college.
The patterns at Washington High indicate that the size of the school impacted the quality of the
institutional agent-student relationships, and that there appears to be racial and class patterns
resulting from the institutional agent-student interactions that take place. Students who used
school faculty and counselors as their only source of guidance, for instance, were Latinos. Their
guidance sources were also Latino faculty and counselors (whose jobs are to serve the ESL
population).

Asian American students are an interesting group to focus on here because they rely so
much on peer networks as a source of college guidance. Like Roosevelt students who were
compelled to rely on personal relationships and their own search skills, Washington students
were also encouraged to fall back on non-institutional sources of information. But, since three
out of the four Washington students are middle class and experienced stronger academic
preparation compared to their Roosevelt peers, and all four have access to academically prepared
middle class peers at the school, their rationales for choosing the community college route differ
from Roosevelt students.
The social interactions between student and counselor can be characterized along the dimensions of frequency of occurrence, intimacy, and trust. What students say about their contacts with their counselors and how they perceive them lead us to inferences about the quality of institutional agent-student relationships—measured here simply as distant or not distant, depending on how the three dimensions are rated based on qualitative responses. Four out of the four students (who rely mostly on peers) describe their relationships with counselors in ways that lead us to categorize their institutional relationships as distant. They describe their relationships as low frequency and low intimacy. Mistrust was not identified in general, but neither was it discussed since contacts were infrequent. Gilbert and Charles (both second generation Chinese-Americans) report that they like their academic counselors, but they just don’t approach them to talk explicitly about college. Referring to academic counselors (rather than college counselors) Gilbert says, “The counselors are cool…I just never went.” Charles explains that he would only go to his academic counselor when he needed to change a class. Their statements converge with the experiences of other students at Washington High, who utilize the academic counselors primarily for high school graduation requirements or academic issues. Similar to other large public schools, the frequency of counselor-student contacts at Washington’s comprehensive school are generally low (due to high student case loads), except perhaps for students who are doing poorly in high school.

Students may need to feel trust, in addition to ease of access, in order to activate institutional relationships. When asked why he relied on his peers’ advice during his college search process as opposed to the counsel of the college counselor, Kam replied, “Uh, in the counselor’s office at college/career center there was always a lot of kids standing around the counselor. I mean there was always a line. And…the kids who went were like the counselor, you
know? They know what kinds of questions to ask her. If I went in there I wouldn’t know what to ask...Plus, they could talk about side stuff with her [the counselor]. So that makes talking easier.”

Here, the student is referring to the ability of middle class students to engage in small talk (to make interactions more pleasant) with their counselor because they are *alike*. Following this statement, Kam points out that people sometimes judge youths for the way they dress, their speech patterns, their social knowledge, among other subtle identity cues. It is important to note that the identity patterns this student refers to are developed through social interactions bound by race and class, both at the micro interactional level (e.g., within informal social spaces at school) and broader level (e.g., neighborhood residential patterns). Another important point the student is making is, the knowledge some (usually middle class) students have prepares them to ask focused questions and utilize limited time with institutional agents efficiently. Kam is similar to other students in this study who come from lower income or non-college educated families who find themselves at loss in counselor offices, not knowing what questions to ask because they have little knowledge of the intricacies of the college search process. Thus, access to college counselors is affected by both student background knowledge within social domains and their knowledge within specific content domains. These two types of knowledge contribute to student-counselor interactions, not just the actual amount of time counselors have for each student.

From students’ descriptions of the frequency of contacts between themselves and counselors, as well as the level of trust involved in those contacts, we may infer that the large nature of comprehensive schools does not encourage the development of close relationships between institutional agent and students, especially among certain groups. Gilbert says when he was preparing for college his freshman through junior years and exploring his college options
senior year, he rarely ever consulted any school staff—neither teachers nor counselors, despite the presence of a college resource center: “I don’t ask them what they think. I just tell them that I am going [to do this]…Motivation, I don’t feel comfortable talking to them about it.” Though Gilbert likes his academic counselor and some of his teachers, he does not have experience talking to staff about his academic decisions. Instead, he relies on his “older friends, like friends that are in college who are tutors [at Washington],” some of whom have gone through the local community colleges and transferred to a University of California he wants to enter. These older peers give him advice about which community college have good transfer rates, what transfer rates mean, and which colleges have prestige. Accessibility is one reason Gilbert and other Washington students use slightly older peers as their guides. Another is that slightly older students may be more able to make high school students feel comfortable. For Gilbert, Charles, and Kam, it is more comfortable to turn to more experienced peers or friends in the same grade who are more knowledgeable. These students’ reports suggest the importance of socializing youths to interact on a more equal footing with older adults, of hiring school staff who are able to connect on a personal level with the demographic of their school, and of employing older peer mentors to bridge the gap between counselors and students.

Guidance for community college

Given that the two large comprehensive schools employ either a low-resource, low-intensity approach (Roosevelt) or high resource, low intensity approach (Washington), their students are left with little information and guidance specific to community college life. Similarly, students who attended the small school Wilson High reported receiving the generic kind of information about community college (as described previously). At that school, the heavy focus on getting students to consider four-year colleges may have taken some focus from
community colleges. Students who attended Lincoln High were given slightly more guidance with community colleges in that school staff facilitated small group trips to local two-year colleges to guide students through the enrollment process and acclimate them to the campus environment. Yet, none of the high schools provided students with a working knowledge of important practices and assumptions underlying community college life. As documented in the next two chapters, participants’ difficulty with key practices at two-year colleges (such as education planning) and their surprise upon encountering assessment tests and experiencing remedial courses suggest that the information about community college given to students during high school are at best described as generic and at worst characterized as misrepresented.

Expressions that most student participants repeated in both high school and college interviews are that lower division classes (or, courses at community college) are “preparation” for four-year college and students should just “get them out of the way.” Such descriptions do not help students understand that in many cases “preparation” is remediation that entail ineffective and boring pedagogy and no college credit. Moreover, focusing on just getting requirements out of the way does not teach students the process of effective education planning that will help them sustain interest through the difficult years of college study.

When limited guidance for community college is considered in parallel to the outlook student participants bring to college—which, from chapter three, may be characterized as optimistic or pessimistic—then we can see a convergence of factors that may have led to some participants to conclude at a later point that college may not be for them. Table 3.4 maps the high school environments that optimists and pessimists came from and their subsequent college persistence behavior. Students who were lost by the third interview are labeled as “missing.” Note that many of the participants whose frame of reference are negative (as described in chapter
three) attended small schools. The overwhelming dominance of college persistence among optimists and the overwhelming dominance of leave-taking among pessimists suggest that high school guidance may not have had long lasting effects. In addition, the guidance in small school environments may have given students the tools and motivation to enroll in community college immediately after high school graduation, but not the tools to manage the challenges that arise.

Table 3.4: Participants’ outlook, high school origin, and subsequent college participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outlook within context of college</th>
<th>High school environment</th>
<th>College participation behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Optimists</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Kylie</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Early leaver&lt;sup&gt;8&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gilbert</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Charles</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. May</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Ella</td>
<td>Small school</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Art</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Early leaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Willow</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Early leaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. John</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Lisa</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Erin</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Jarvis</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Late leaver&lt;sup&gt;9&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Taeshe</td>
<td>Small school</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Ken</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Xia</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Emme</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Tavis</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Kam</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Desiree</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Missing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Oscar</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Early leaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pessimists</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Alaine</td>
<td>Small school</td>
<td>Late leaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Diane</td>
<td>Small school</td>
<td>Late leaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ray</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Jordan</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Late leaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Bea</td>
<td>Large comprehensive</td>
<td>Missing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>8</sup> This student actually stopped out. She withdrew during Fall of 2007 and returned to community college the term after. As noted in chapter six, stop-outs are not differentiated from drop-outs due to complications with some cases.

<sup>9</sup> This student stopped out during the summer of 2008 and returned to community college the Fall of 2008.
As previously described, guidance to assist students in thinking about and preparing for college enrollment during high school is perceived by students as crucial. While the low-intensity guidance employed by large comprehensives work to get to the large number of students they serve, the high intensity guidance targeting multiple targets (information, experiential learning, and personal/motivation) are reported by students to be more effective. This may be so because students who attended the small school environments experienced life circumstances that complicated their belief in their own success in college. However, high schools’ inattention to the demands of community college does not position students to

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10 Non-entrants are those who did not enroll in community college (during the duration of this study) after all despite their intentions to do so.

11 Though this study did not encompass in-depth interviews with high school counselors, there is some evidence (through student interviews and my informal talks with counselors) that high school staff perceive community college as an interstitial space between high school and four-years rather than an institution with its own particular demands.
overcome the challenges of the first year of college and persist towards transfer to four-year institutions. The challenging experiences participants have during their first year in community college, documented in the next chapter, reflect the limited guidance regarding community college obtained in high school.
Negotiating the first year experience of community college

During the spring semester of their last year in high school, research participants stated their desire to enroll in some sort of postsecondary program after high school, and all reported an intention to enroll in community college. This chapter describes the enrollment behavior of participants in the 2007-08 academic year following high school interviews, as reported by students. Beyond describing students’ initial enrollment behavior, a second goal is to provide an analytic scheme for interpreting students’ interactions with their respective college. The experiences student participants perceive as salient in their first year at college can be thought of as falling within two domains—the structural and the relational. Structural features include programs (e.g., vocational, transfer, non-credit, enrichment, etc.), curriculum (e.g., discipline or degree-specific, remedial, transfer-level), non-academic services (e.g., student services, library, athletics, etc.) and other attributes (e.g., demographic composition). Relational features include academic standards (academic expectations of students), social communities on campus, student-educator bonds (faculty interest in student learning), college climate (e.g., racial climate), and commuter campus attributes. To locate themselves in their new environment in their first year at community college, student participants were at work making sense of the structural and relational features specific to the two-year institution.

The following discussion provides a description and analysis of a set of probable influences on student persistence behavior, allowing us a bounded view of the factors underlying
student-institution interactions that is key to understanding the bigger picture of two-year college student success. I focus on two structural features of community college—assessments and academic counseling. For students, remedial or transfer-level placement and course planning are critical factors in the process of moving towards transfer to a four-year institution. Thus, these areas can be considered key sites of college student development, especially for first year students. What is common among participants in this study is their limited understanding of how to construct an educational plan for their undergraduate study, which, in turn, contributes to their sense of uncertainty in the transitional year. Specifically, students do not know how to make sense of their course options, and do not fully understand the implications of remedial placement for course planning and their movement towards transfer. The approaches to academic advising at their community colleges, unfortunately, fall short of preparing students in this area. Subsequently, students fall back on their prior knowledge and information resources available through social relationships in community college to make curricular choices.

**Initial enrollment patterns**

Within the first six months following high school graduation, students were interviewed and asked whether they actually enrolled in college immediately after high school as they originally planned, and what motivations underlie their enrollment behavior. Of the forty youths who volunteered to participate in this study during the spring of 2006-07 academic year, thirty (or 75%) students enrolled within twelve months of high school graduation\(^1\). Six (or 15%)

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\(^1\) Of these thirty students, one decided not to participate in any interviews after the high school, though he stated he was attending community college. This student spoke with the researcher over the phone in December of 2007, and his enrollment status during the fall semester of 2007 was confirmed by another participant (his friend) who lived in the same neighborhood he did and was in the same social circles. This student was counted as part of the group of thirty who followed through with their goal to enroll in two-year college.
students opted not to enroll the following academic year\(^2\). Four students were unreachable after the first interview, and their enrollment status could not be verified. Thus 90% (n = 36) of the original cohort (N = 40) was accounted for six months after high school graduation. Based on the number of students who followed through with their stated intent to enroll in postsecondary education and the content of college interviews, we might infer that youths from our sample are motivated to access postsecondary education. While the sample is relatively small, this finding suggests that explanations for a broken college pipeline that focus exclusively on lack of student motivation to access college can be questioned\(^3\).

Among those who participated in a second interview the fall after high school graduation, an overwhelming majority (83%, or twenty-five out of thirty) say that they followed through with the community college enrollment process because they need to prepare for an occupational future through a college education (preferably a bachelor’s degree) and, for them, there are few opportunities for advancement outside of school. For this group, learning (within particular fields of interest) was also a motivation, though expressed less readily relative to preparation for work. The rest (17%, or five out of thirty) continued with postsecondary education primarily for learning and a sense that a four-year college education is the “natural” thing to do. Among this minority, nearly all are middle class students\(^4\).

Perhaps equally as significant for our understanding of the college pipeline process is a consideration of the group who did not enroll in community college during the span of this study. The four students who were available for follow up interviews after high school include youths

\(^2\) Of these six, Emme, who acquired health problems as a result of a car accident, delayed enrollment for two semesters and enrolled in community college the fall of 2008.

\(^3\) This explanation is sometimes used by administrators and others to account for the high attrition rate within the first year of community college enrollment.

\(^4\) Another way of putting this is, all the middle class students in the sample discussed college in terms of learning and a social rite. The one exception is Kam who barely passed his high school courses and felt community college would be a way to learn what he should have learned in high school.
who did not enroll due to a variety of issues related to their financial circumstances and prior academic preparation. Michael, Joseph, Sonny, and Quin\(^5\) all opted to enter the workforce because they perceived that their academic skills were too weak to continue with postsecondary education, and that there was not enough time—a luxury afforded by financial resources—to “catch up.”

Table 4.1 summarizes the description from above to provide an overview of the enrollment decisions of participating students and their high school origin. Of note, among those who did not enroll in college within twelve months from high school graduation, there is greater representation of students from Roosevelt and Wilson, schools with lower academic achievement as indicated by API scores. In the next chapter, we will also see that most of the students from Lincoln (3 out of 4), the continuation school, also consider withdrawing from the transfer-track path at community college after only one semester of enrollment. Supporting prior quantitative analyses on this subject, this study also finds that prior academic preparation is strongly associated with academic persistence towards a baccalaureate. Though all four of the high schools differ in terms of their college guidance strategy (as reported by students), what is common among non-entrants and leavers are reports of limited academic preparation or dissatisfaction with remedial placement and courses.

\(^5\) Quin actually joined the armed services to obtain pay and benefits, and prepare for some sort of postsecondary education later. In this way she is similar to other low income participants who considered short-term vocational programs that offer immediate (or guaranteed) pay-offs to schooling investment, before riskier programs (i.e., programs that require time and financial investment without guarantees of employment). No programs guarantee employment. However, students explain that if one has worked in an industry and has seen success in one’s work, the conclusion to be made is that obtaining a degree (i.e., a formal license) in the area of experience will only increase chances for success.
Table 4.1: Profile of student enrollment patterns over the 12 months after high school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High school origin</th>
<th>Enrolled in community college</th>
<th>Did not enroll in community college</th>
<th>Attrition from study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roosevelt</td>
<td>12 (n = 30)</td>
<td>6 (n = 6)</td>
<td>4 (n = 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>14 (n = 13)</td>
<td>0 (n = 0)</td>
<td>1 (n = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>4 (n = 3)</td>
<td>0 (n = 0)</td>
<td>1 (n = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson</td>
<td>10 (n = 7)</td>
<td>2 (n = 2)</td>
<td>0 (n = 0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Assessment and advising: Access points to community college

The thirty students who enrolled in community college the academic year following high school graduation reported several key issues. The experiences student participants report as especially challenging include assessment and advising (structural features specific to students’ respective community college) and the commuter campus environment (relational feature common to all community colleges). Assessment and course planning are the first critical tasks students need to complete in order to access college. These tasks, however, are not merely requirements to access an organization, not single events independent of one another that take place only at the start of college. Course planning, especially, is a complex task that occurs over time, depending on the progress of the student and policies and resources of the college. Students also rely on social networks as support for academic tasks, in addition to formal college resources; yet, participants in this study find that the commuter campus, with its distinct social environment, offer limited points of access to informational pathways, which, in turn,

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6 Within one year of high school graduation.
7 Within one year of high school graduation.
8 Within 6 months of the start of study. Of the four, one male youth decided not to continue participating in the study, and three female youths went missing due to mistakes made by the three interviewers when doing intake on personal contact information.
significantly influence their learning how to function in college—in other words, to do critical tasks such as assessment, course planning, and obtaining academic and informational supports. Examining the commuter campus environment, thus, directs our attention to the role social relationships, as they occur within an organizational context, play in students’ adjustment to a new organization.

Cost and financial aid are important aspects of the college transition discussion, and this research sample raises the question of community college affordability. This chapter, however, will be limited to an exploration of the few key institutional processes students find important within their first year in college. Since the public two-year institution does not offer the residential campus experience, students perceive the primary function of community college as providing courses. Courses can fall in various realms (such as transfer, vocational degree, enrichment, etc.) and for youths whose goal is to transfer to a four-year college, course taking entails finding a path to specialization as well as meeting transfer requirements. The question for students is how to bridge the gap between where they are academically at the start of college and where they want to end up. Assessment and advising are structures within community college that direct students to an entry point of a curricular program, and influence the path they take to finding an academic specialization. Examining student experiences in these structural areas focuses our attention on the getting-to-know process a new college member engages in when she interacts with organizational practices and assumptions underlying how an organization conceptualizes and implements placement and guidance of students.

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9 While California community college tuition has historically been very low, many of the participants in this study report difficulty attending community college without financial aid for tuition and materials. The varied costs of attending two-year college must be considered as it has important implications for many residents in California.
Assessment

Though most research participants reported during high school that they were familiar\(^\text{10}\) with local two-year colleges, when they actually experienced the process of enrollment for the first time as intended full time students, they became acutely aware of the unfamiliar procedures. The initial enrollment experiences reported by students stand in contrast to what they experienced in high school where, generally, students are moved through the grades by age and confined to a relatively standardized curriculum. While there were variations across colleges, common themes arose from participants’ discussions. Students described their experiences with first-time enrollment as a process that first involves assessment, then academic counseling\(^\text{11}\) and subsequently course enrollment. Assessment is the testing process that entails the evaluation of a prospective student’s English and math skills, which the colleges’ catalogues define as “a session [that] provides you with a measurement of your current skills in reading, writing, and mathematics.” Counseling at this stage of enrollment involves a brief session with a counselor\(^\text{12}\) who helps the student “select appropriate courses based on [her] educational objectives, assessment results, and “multiple measures\(^\text{13}\)” of information.”

The assessment process is significant for students in at least two ways. First, it determines whether a student will be on track to finish an AA degree or transfer-track curriculum in two

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\(^{10}\) Students were asked during high school interviews whether they were familiar with their local community colleges, and, if so, what they know about them. Overall, students’ perception is that they know these colleges; however, when probed for details most could not provide details about departments, programs, or college student responsibilities.

\(^{11}\) Currently, there does not exist a mechanism to force assessment and counseling for students whose goal is a two-year degree or transfer. Nearly all of the research participants in this study, however, chose to engage in the assessment process.

\(^{12}\) The counselor may not be a regular academic adviser at the college. Community colleges are overwhelmed certain times of the academic year, and consequently utilize other college staff who undergo internal counseling training before performing advising tasks.

\(^{13}\) The college district’s (which most participants attend) online catalogue does not elaborate what “multiple measures” mean; however, two of the four individual colleges within the district state in their websites that a student may provide counselors with additional information that could lead to the counselor recommending a course other than what the student’s assessment score suggest.
years’ time—the amount of time students are led to believe it should generally take. Second, depending on how far down the remediation ladder the student is placed, assessment results impact students’ academic self-perception, or perceived ability to successfully complete a college degree. In other words, the assessment process brings to light the fact that for students who approach community college as a “second chance” institution, “starting over” does not mean that all students start college at the same point. In reality, some students must start their academic study at a high school level (or below), and review material (in prerequisite courses) for a substantial amount of time before they are recommended for transfer-level courses. This is a hard fact that is obscured by both high schools and community colleges.

Even though assessment scores directly impact the amount of time a student has to spend in remediation, colleges send students to this process without preparation. When student participants registered with their college (in person or online), they were directed to take the assessment test but were not told beforehand that if they do poorly on the test, they will be placed in remediation and that they may not have the opportunity to retake the test. Only two of the colleges in the district participants enrolled in posted information online about assessments that hint at its importance: “The assessment results, along with other information you provide, will be used to evaluate the [math and English] recommendations.” It is hard for new students to glean from this statement, however, that course recommendations refer to academic level—transferable or non-transferable college courses—and that remediation is linked to time to graduation or transfer.

14 During high school, students brought up the notion that community college should only take about two years—to complete prerequisites for transfer to upper division education at a four-year institution—but it was hard for them to pinpoint where they had gotten this idea. For example, John’s view of community college education is typical: “I didn’t mind taking two years to get everything out of the way in community college.”

15 Institutional research confirms that with each addition of a remedial level to a sequence of English or math, a significant number of students are lost.

16 If they intend to matriculate, they are directed towards assessment and new student orientation.
**Students’ experience of assessment.** Based on interview data collected approximately six months after high school, slightly more than three quarters (n=23) of the thirty\(^{17}\) who enrolled the academic year following high school graduation tested into remediation in either math or English or both. Six students tested into freshman level English and calculus. One student’s (Emme) assessment data are missing, partly due to the fact that she delayed enrollment for two semesters after a serious car accident and her interviews were done later and parts were accidently deleted.

The assessment test itself was generally described by all student participants who enrolled in the academic year following high school graduation as relatively straightforward—that is, the English and math tests were generally considered familiar (i.e., the kind of testing students have taken in the past). It is in the counseling session where assessment results are explained that students perceived difficulties. At this point, some students point out that they found certain assessment practices unfair or invalid. First, no counseling is offered to prepare for the assessments. The amount of time elapsed between last high school math and English course and college assessment is an important factor. Student participants argue that a relatively brief review of math and English composition concepts and practice\(^{18}\) would have sufficed as preparation for assessments. Second, students find some colleges’ practice of automated ending of math exams upon first error (incorrect response) invalid. Students who are nervous in testing situations are likely to make an error in calculation, and yet the computer-assisted tests are programmed to end when a student makes the first mistake. This leaves the student without the opportunity to try other questions that may be within their ability.

\(^{17}\) The experiences of participants in this research sample are not unusual. The remediation rate across community colleges are high (Rassen et al, 2013).

\(^{18}\) Students do not report receiving notice before assessment testing about opportunities to prepare/practice for the tests. However, some community colleges do have practice tests available from student services if students inquire. The problem is many students do not know enough to ask for such preparation.
Beyond students’ experience with the testing process, the lack of coordination among the colleges adds further confusion. Each community college in California generates its own assessment exams and each employs different policies in regards to whether (or how often) students are allowed to retake the test. In addition, each college structures and communicates its enrollment process to new students differently (this is true even within the same district). Student participants are encouraged to take classes from different colleges within the same district, yet they must work with college-specific policies (such as assessment and remediation placement) that have implications beyond their time at a particular college.

Thus, the content and implementation of assessments are only the first stumbling blocks for students; college policies further complicate the “getting-to-know” process students engage in with their new college. How students respond to placement in remediation indicates not only the resources they have at their disposal to manage such surprises, but also the organizational context within which they negotiate their way through the first year of college attendance. Specifically, students in this study reacted in various ways to their assessment results, due to the cognitive and emotional skill sets they bring into college. Their varied reactions also appear to be shaped by the counseling approach employed at a college, which functions as the context for assessment.

**Student responses to assessment.** Student responses to placement in remediation may be sorted into three groups—the first being those who discover the implications of remediation after testing and accept it \(n=4\), the second being those who protest remedial placement upon learning its significance \(n=7\), and the third being those who take longer to process the consequences of assessments \(n=12\). In other words, of the twenty-three students (out of thirty enrollees) who

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19 This practice is beginning to change.
20 To reduce redundancy and competition, each college has program specialties that other colleges within the same district don’t offer.
tested into remediation, over half take one or more semesters to process the implications. This suggests that, on the one hand, there is great variation in terms of students’ resources and response repertoires and, on the other, the implications of remedial placement is not consistently made transparent by the colleges.

Table 4.2 summarizes the high school origin and later college persistence behavior of the group of students who tested into remediation that first semester. The students are grouped along their response to remediation. Students who accept remediation because they think they ought to improve their academic skills are in the first block (colored in light gray). Students who resist remediation early on are in the second (colored in gray), and the ones who take longer to process the implications of remediation are in the third block (colored in dark gray). In this way, we can see that among the first group (the smallest), there does not seem to be any association between the student’s reaction to remediation and their high school origin, or their reaction and later persistence behavior in community college. Within the second and third groups (that are larger), there does seem to be greater representation of students from the small schools who try to circumvent remediation early on (4 out of a group of 7\(^{21}\)), and somewhat greater representation of students from the large high schools (8 out of 12\(^{22}\)) who take longer to process remediation. There also appear to be greater representation of students from the slow reaction group who later withdraw (8 out of 12) or stop out (3 out of 12) from community college. These observations should be taken with caution, however, since the sample size is small and participant selection was not random.

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\(^{21}\) Participants from the small school environment make up 35% of the original sample (14 out of 40). In the remediation group, they make up 57% (4 out of 7).

\(^{22}\) Participants from the large school environment make up 63% of the original sample (25 out of 40). In the remediation group, they make up 67% (8 out of 12).
Table 4.2: Profiles of students organized by their reaction to remediation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>High school origin</th>
<th>High school counseling/support</th>
<th>Persistence or departure at Point 1*, Point 2**, Point 3*** in community college</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accept remediation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willow</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Batch processing</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lana</td>
<td>Wilson</td>
<td>Brokering</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desiree</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Batch processing</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>Roosevelt</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resist remediation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kylie</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Batch processing</td>
<td>Departure at Point 1, re-enroll later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netta</td>
<td>Wilson</td>
<td>Brokering</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taeshe</td>
<td>Wilson</td>
<td>Brokering</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>Wilson</td>
<td>Brokering</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tavis</td>
<td>Roosevelt</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xia</td>
<td>Roosevelt</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>Brokering</td>
<td>Departure at Point 1, re-enroll later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Uncertain/confused</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alaine</td>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>Brokering</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dee</td>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>Brokering</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kam</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Batch processing</td>
<td>Departure at Point 3, re-enroll later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Batch processing</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Batch processing</td>
<td>Departure at Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Batch processing</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Batch processing</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne</td>
<td>Wilson</td>
<td>Brokering</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Randall</td>
<td>Wilson</td>
<td>Brokering</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>Roosevelt</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jarvis</td>
<td>Roosevelt</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2, re-enroll later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damond</td>
<td>Roosevelt</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*6 months post high school  
**12 months post high school  
***18 months post high school

The first group consists of four students who have tested more than one level (semester) below freshman English composition or transfer-level math and have a history of academic struggle in that area in high school and would like to improve those skills. Willow, a very recent immigrant from Peru, is the only one out of the four who reports struggling with English as a second language, though her academic skills in other areas are reported to be strong. She learned through assessment that she must take a series of ESL courses before she can take the English composition courses (that are geared towards natives). Lana, also, is distinct in that she has a

23 Persistence up to a point means that the student did not participate in an interview after that point, and enrollment status could not be verified with the student.
learning disability and struggled throughout her education, until she was diagnosed in high school and received additional support in her junior and senior years. She says she would like to spend more time during her college years to work on her writing and math skills, even though she placed at a very basic level in math. The third and fourth students, however, are neither an immigrant nor learning disabled. Desiree placed in an arithmetic (basic math) class, and understood it would take her more than four semesters to reach transfer level math. Yet, she has always struggled in math, and thinks it is a good idea to relearn certain material. These students are similar in their acknowledgement of weaknesses in certain academic areas. They are characterized here as students who accept remediation with the perspective that they will learn something of value, despite the disruption in expected time to completion. It is unclear from interviews whether the college assessment counseling students received or prior high school experience made a difference in shaping their response. The exception to this pattern is Erin, who was told by her college counselor that it doesn’t matter which math she took as long as she took two semesters worth for her pre-nursing program. Not facing disruption to moving forward with her program, she feels content to re-take pre-Algebra in community college.

The second group (n=7) consists mainly of students who had tested at more than one level below transfer-level composition and/or math, though some of them had received positive academic feedback in high school. This group of students differs from the first group in their response to assessment results. They voiced strong disagreement with the assessment process and considered various methods to bypass remediation. These students, with their individual background experiences, know to question the meaning of their assessment placement. The most clear cut example of how background knowledge of assessment testing can contribute to strategic behavior in college can be found with Kylie, a middle class student who was diagnosed
with ADHD in high school. Her experience learning about her disability at Washington High and the accommodations made by the school taught her the significance of testing for her education and how to approach it. When she experienced a setback during assessments at her community college, she knew to ask for a re-test with appropriate accommodations so that she could bypass remediation. Kylie recounts how she approached the enrollment personnel at her community college:

Kylie: I had [accommodations] in high school which allows me extra time on tests and when I tested into this class, I didn't get a chance to finished my [assessment] test which was unfair. I went back twice to get a higher score and I never got to finish the test. Like, [the community college] didn't accommodate the fact that I have disability and I complained to the counselor she said you can just go back and take the test again…these counselors don’t even know a lot about testing.

She explains here that she expects to get extra time on tests, due to accommodations she received in high school. Later, she admitted she did not know that colleges could place a student in math and English at levels comparable to high school. When she discovered the situation, she also discovered that the college required certain documentation and additional paperwork to give her additional test time, all of which took time for her to prepare. She initially tried to take her assessment test a second time without going through the formal disability accommodation process, only to find she received the same result. Then, after briefly trying the remedial English class, which she reported to be too easy and boring, she concluded that she needed to go through the laborious process of securing documentation of her disability to bypass remediation. Unlike Lana, who had no family intervention before or after her disability diagnosis, Kylie has supportive family and learned earlier how testing can make a difference in curricular placement and subsequent educational outcomes.

Like Kylie, other students who received remedial placement felt the assessment process they experienced as somehow unfair. Netta, Taeshe, and Ellen, who all attended the small school
Wilson High, received feedback during high school that led them to believe they have academic potential or that they were smart. Netta was described in an earlier chapter as a four-year college candidate by her teachers. Once she enrolled in a remedial math class her first semester, Netta began to process the implications of taking courses that are not transferrable (do not earn college credit towards a bachelor’s degree) and discussed with the researcher of this study what she might discuss with assessment counselors to bypass remediation. Taeshe also received high grades overall during high school—she received a small scholarship for being an honor roll student—and believed she was solid in academics. After she placed in remedial math during the first year of enrollment, she tried the algebra class and spoke to her instructor about how she should approach the assessment exam the second time around. Ellen, too, spoke to people about how she might raise her assessment score to bypass remediation. Though she differs from the other two in that she earned only passing grades until senior year—when her marks rose considerably—Ellen showed that she believed she could handle a higher level course:

Ellen: The math [assessment], the math was hard, I don’t think they, I really don’t think they should [use] assessment test like… I had Trigonometry in high school [but] now I’m in basic Algebra… it’s like no, I can do better than that! Yeah the class in the beginning--I mean they start getting harder at the end--but in the beginning [it] was time tables and fractions! Like I know this stuff! And [the college assessment counselors] were saying that they offer to take you to the part that you didn’t pass [to refresh]. But I was like, that’s stupid! I think they should go over like your high school transcript, they should use that.

She echoes the other students’ responses—their surprise and resentment at finding they must repeat subjects taken in high school, as well as puzzlement over why there is a gap between the secondary and community college systems.

Tavis and Xia, both of whom attended Roosevelt High and both of whom are more recent immigrants, expressed confidence in their academic ability and circumvented remediation in English in their own way. Xia decided to ignore her counselor’s suggestion that she take the
English course one level below transfer-level English, because she felt that her borderline score is no reason to follow such advice. English is her second language, she says, and that is why her score is borderline—not because she has poor analytical or writing skills. She reports that in China she earned the highest grades, and feels she will continue to do well as long as she plans to enroll in English 1A\textsuperscript{24} at a later date to allow her time to practice her English in other classes. Tavis, the one within this second group most comfortable with counselors, persuaded his counselor to place him in a transfer-level course since his assessment score was borderline. I hypothesize that a causal mechanism underlying these students’ counter response to their assessment results is prior feedback about their academic potential (through AP enrollment, grades, or informal teacher evaluations). This background experience—the understanding that they can handle more difficult classes than were given to them at community college—is what triggers their thoughts about approaching assessment counselors early on to discuss how they might prepare to retake the assessment test, or in the case of Tavis, actually persuade the college agent in facilitating the change.

There is variation in students’ repertoire of response, however. Unlike the five students cited above, Tim, a low-income African American youth, responded to his assessment results by immediately withdrawing. His greatest frustration with the community college system was their request that he take non-transferable courses: “Well, it wasn’t all about me being offended. A lot of it was about taking a class and not getting credit for it.” He did not use any method that could work within the postsecondary institution (such as talking with a counselor or finding a way to re-take the assessment test); instead he reacted strongly by dropping his enrollment (and would not return for another two semesters). While it may be tempting to dismiss this case as an

\textsuperscript{24} Students can actually bypass counselors’ remediation recommendations when they enroll in courses in subsequent to initial matriculation activities.
aberration—an extreme reaction from a youth who does not have the requisite emotional and cognitive skill set to deal with such a setback—what is important to note is the commonality he shares with other students described: Being labeled remedial (i.e., not college-ready) and learning that high school coursework completion does not necessarily facilitate college access is a heavy blow to motivation already complicated by background experiences (as described in prior chapters).

The youths in the third group (n=12) do not explicitly investigate the significance of basic skills placement—at least not until well into their first academic year when they start to understand how much more time they must invest in community college if they are to reach their transfer goals. That is, when questioned by the interviewer in the first semester about the place of their English and/or math course in the sequence of transferable English and math courses, most in this group do not express a clear understanding of where their recommended math and English stand. Of note, the majority of these students (10 out of 12) do not indicate a strong academic self in their high school interviews. That is, many discuss negative experiences in school in the past, though it is not necessarily the case that the negative experiences arose from lack of potential. For example, Lisa, a very recent immigrant who had attended school in the U.S. for less than two years prior to entering community college, is still feeling her way around the U.S. college system and has little awareness of how long it would take her to reach her vocational goal or the significance of having to take a long ESL sequence before being eligible for transfer level English courses. For others, such as Jordan and Ray who struggled in their high school classes, having some familiarity with two-year colleges through relatives who participated in the system was not a buffer against the confusion they found when faced with the task of making sense of courses. It is not clear what kind of relationship exists between the students’ high school
background and the time it takes for them to process the implications of remediation, if any. The difference between the first two groups and this last one may not just be in their prior experience or dispositions; it may be dependent on the counseling approach they experienced.

Below, Table 4.3 offers a description of the availability of academic counseling typically experienced by participants at their respective community colleges. While the descriptors “less accessible” and “more accessible” are rather expansive, they are meant to describe generally how students perceive the counseling they receive. Among the colleges that are labeled less accessible, students perceive the counseling they receive as less tailored to their specific needs—that is, the information is pre-packaged and the amount of time with a counselor very limited or ineffectual. A potential effect of such counseling on students’ interpretation of assessment and remedial placement is misunderstanding. The third group of students described above represents this situation, wherein the impact on time to completion is not obvious to the student. Though there does not appear to be a clear association between the categories of counseling accessibility and student interpretation of remediation (i.e., acceptance, rejection, uncertainty), as illustrated by Table 4.3, a mechanism of the limited counseling that can be explored in interview data is the “soft” approach taken by counselors to frame remedial education. This approach is detailed in the next section.

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25 Since observations of counseling sessions and interviews of college staff were not part of this study, what is described in this chapter are based solely on student reports.

26 There can be other consequences in addition to delay in time to completion, such as student loss of academic focus due to extended repetition of courses of high school.

27 From Table 3 we can see that community college counseling is in general perceived by students as less accessible, due to the volume of students counselors need to see. However, three out of four students (of total N = 40) who attended community colleges outside of the district that the rest of the participants attended (Valley College and Lake College) indicate that they felt more of a connection to their counselors as a result of personal warmth, effective counseling tactics, and/or perceived accessibility during non-peak counseling times. One student tried counseling services at more than one college in the district that most participants attended, and reported George College as offering the best counseling service (“better” information) compared to the other three colleges in the district.
Table 4.3: Profiles of students organized by reaction to remediation and college destinations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Community college</th>
<th>College counseling approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willow</td>
<td>George College</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lana</td>
<td>Abraham College</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desiree</td>
<td>George College</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>Franklin College</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kylie</td>
<td>Valley College</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netta</td>
<td>Woodrow College</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taeshe</td>
<td>Lake College</td>
<td>More accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>Woodrow College</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tavis</td>
<td>Franklin College</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xia</td>
<td>Franklin College</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>Woodrow College</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alaine</td>
<td>George College</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dee</td>
<td>Franklin College</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kam</td>
<td>George College</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>Franklin College</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>George College</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Franklin College</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>George College</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne</td>
<td>Woodrow College</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Randall</td>
<td>Hill College</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>Woodrow College</td>
<td>Less Accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jarvis</td>
<td>Abraham College</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damond</td>
<td>Woodrow College</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

College counseling as context for interpretation of remediation. Students’ interviews suggest some counselors are “soft” in their approach to describing remedial education. That is, counselors may present remedial courses as courses that help students do better in more advanced courses, as opposed to courses that were non-college credit. Alaine describes her understanding of assessment as a test to “see what classes that I would do best in.” We may infer from her description that remediation was framed to her in such a way that encourages students to see the benefits of basic skills courses, rather than the drawbacks. Other student participants

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28 Three students from this list (Erin, Randall, and Jarvis) attended more than one college by the second year of community college. Erin and Randall moved to other colleges because they decided to move to other cities to live with different family members. Table 3, however, only lists the college the student attended the first full term.
generally describe learning their basic skills classes as courses that “prepare” you for advanced study. The approach of couching remediation in terms of preparative prerequisites obscures the fact that remediation is also a repeating of prior courses from secondary school. Different terms for the same object (“basic skills” versus “remediation”) and framing work together to obfuscate unpleasant facts that might otherwise elicit opposition from students.

In addition to jargon and framing, counselors may rely on silence to avoid lengthy discussions with students about the meaning of remediation. Jarvis, Ray, and Kam simply stated that their counselor just told them what their English and math requirements were (which courses they should take) after evaluating their assessment scores. These students did not indicate during their first term that they had any understanding of what those prerequisites mean in terms of the length of the math and English sequences they must take. Erin, a student from Roosevelt High, reported that she did not remember what level math she placed in after taking her assessment test. She is typical of other students in this group because she is not clear about what remediation means: “Cuz I don’t even know what I placed in when I took the test but [the counselor] just advised me to take the lowest math that I could take, he said “whatever one you want to take,” so I went “ok”. Her description of how she ended up in her math class at community college suggests to us that the counselor she saw during the enrollment process provided her options according to her intended study (nursing), without delving into why she might want to take the lowest math class available as opposed to the highest one she was tested into, or what her math assessment score means in terms of her prior achievement and upper division college study (should she decide to go that far). The approach is one guided strictly by the program requirements of the student’s educational objective (i.e., program of study), rather than a forward-looking discussion of potential curricular paths down the road.
Erin and the other student participants were unable to recall word for word the exchanges they had with their counselors. But the fact that many in this third group did not know the meaning of the courses they signed up for (whether they were remedial or not), only that the courses fulfilled prerequisites (i.e., for the general education program oriented towards transfer to four-year colleges), suggests to us that counseling—for many participants—probably does not explicitly map out the place of remediation in lower division education or the implications of assessment testing. Based on data from interviews with student after they attended college for a year, it appears that such information does not necessarily come in during later advising sessions either. This issue is addressed further below.

Course advising

Students’ experience of academic advising. Course advising may be held in a one-on-one or in a small group context. It is in these sessions that students receive some direction for course enrollment. As stated in the district community college catalogue: Counselors help students “select appropriate courses based on [the student’s] educational objectives, assessment results, and ‘multiple measures’ of information.” With this in mind, counselors guide students to appropriate program requirements/courses. Students who aim for a four-year college degree are directed to transfer guidelines (specific to California community colleges, California State Universities, and the University of California) and UC General Education Breadth requirements, CSU General Education Breadth requirements, or IGETC (Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum). Most student participants in this study (n=34) were interested in a four-year bachelor’s degree when first interviewed in high school. Thus, nearly all the student participants who do enroll the year after high school graduation tell their counselors their goal is to transfer. Counselors, accordingly, streamline the short counseling session by focusing their
discussion with students on the above transfer guidelines and UC/CSU General Education or IGETC requirements.

Since the defined institutional priority of post-assessment counseling is to help students select appropriate courses based on the student’s educational objective, the IGETC and UC/CSU General Education Breadth requirements become the primary resources for advising about course planning. Counselors introduce transfer oriented course lists, students say, upon hearing a student’s baccalaureate objective. These lists serve to focus students’ attention on certain courses and not others, lending the importance of some over others. As such, the transfer agreements fundamentally shape student thinking about curricular planning.

**Student approaches to course planning.** Participants report using the IGETC or UC/CSU GE lists as a means to delimit the large universe of possibilities and a way to meet transfer requirements. For some, this method helps them focus on a smaller range of choices that are organized along disciplinary categories; and for others, it is merely a list of requirements. Whether students respond to the IGETC or UC/CSU GE lists as a tool to stimulate thinking about a disciplinary focus for their college study or just a list of unrelated options likely reflects some combination of counseling approach and prior student knowledge. The two responses described here are actually better understood as abstractions that fall on continuum (or a range of responses). In fact, student talk regarding course choice-making reflects a variety of approaches incorporating various ideas about fundamental courses, the importance of meeting institutional requirements, curricular exploration, and the relationship between preparation for a vocation and academic study. Individual course planning is generally an on-going, evolving process that builds on ideas learned from prior contexts but stays open to demands in new situations.
Student interviews show there is variation in student approaches to course planning in their first year of community college attendance; yet within the variation we can identify general patterns to student thinking about course choice-making. One student approach is labeled here as conservative because prior conceptions about curriculum and course planning are conserved when students choose to take classes that they find similar to their high school core courses or stay close to the general education requirement options counselors present. This approach suggests students may not know how to make sense of curricular options at the postsecondary level and rely on prior knowledge in the process of learning to do course planning. Prior knowledge include ideas such as what constitutes foundational courses, the importance of staying within the bounds of institutional conditions, and the relationship between general education requirements and one’s major or vocational interests. The reasoning students provide during their first semester enrolled in community college illustrate the role prior knowledge plays in the process of transitioning from the high school system where A-G requirements predominate to the college system where programmatic requirements exist but with much greater room for movement and individual study.

Gilbert, Kam and Netta are representative of students who made course decisions within their first year relying on their prior knowledge of what courses are considered important. For Gilbert, the IGETC list is comparable to the A-G requirements he followed in high school to ensure entrance into the University of California system. During the first year at community college, he narrows his course options to only those courses that are UC and CSU eligible and “easy” enough that he could earn a good grade to be competitive in the later transfer process.

Gilbert: I just take the ones on the IGETC list. You know, IGETC for transfer. UC transferables. It’s like—it’s like a requirement to me. You know at high school, you have the requirement thing? It’s kinda like the A-Gs…[After assessment] I had to see [the counselor] like to clear me for the prerequisites and stuff like
Gilbert illustrates how the IGETC list functions to delimit options available. The list frames general education as a set of options for those who want to become members of the California public university system. Gilbert’s approach to using the IGETC framework is conservative in particular in that he relies on IGETC in the same way he followed the A-G requirements in high school, which are more rigid and not meant to encourage students to create their own (distinctive) curricular plan.

Kam and Netta are students who also rely on their prior knowledge of course requirements and “core” subjects when they make course decisions their first semester. Though in contrast to Gilbert, who has his eye focused on increasing his chances to transfer into the University of California system, Kam and Netta chose courses within the General Education list that align with their conception of fundamental courses, based on what they were required to take in elementary and secondary schools and what the college assessment process signals to students.

Kam: [I took the assessments and] I accidentally placed elementary algebra… I’m taking something that I’ve already achieved and just forgotten… The assessment test [had questions from what I did] freshman or sophomore year, that was four years ago. [Now] when I look in my [math] book, it came back very fast…[I’m also taking] English 201a. I wanted to take European history because history is my specialty but the class was full… I guess [I took English and math classes] because I guess… those are the primary steps you—you’ve always taken throughout the years in school so I guess they are the most important things to focus on.

Netta: It was really easy to enroll. I had to pick my classes…I had to pick math, I had to pick English. But I enrolled kinda late so I [couldn’t get into] my English class. Math is like, I mean general education stuff… How did I know to pick [classes]? Well I took the assessment [test] yeah and it was like, you got to take them or it’s better that you take them. You can-I can take [math and English] next year or something. Like coz I didn’t get to get in the English class [this semester] because it was full I’ll just get into one next [semester] or something like that… My counselor kinda helped me [choose another] one of my classes. It’s the career and life planning class. It’s a transferable class… she handed me the list of transferable
classes…and I wanted to take theatre. I like to act. I just have to take one class just for passion. It’s also transferable too.

Kam says that he enrolled in English and math because those are the “primary steps you-you’ve always taken throughout the years in school.” There is a suggestion that because math and English have always been required of students throughout the grade levels, these courses must be foundational or important. Netta couches math and English somewhat differently in that she says these are required courses as suggested by the assessment process. Why she decides to focus on math and English (as opposed to just exploring courses that sound interesting) her first year is not fully articulated. It could be that Netta does not know which courses would move her towards her stated interest in law. Another source of influence may come from high school, where students often cite the discussion (partially driven by teachers and academic counselors) of community college education as “getting prerequisites out of the way.” Both Netta and Kam do show interest in taking one class a semester for pleasure, though their course taking pattern is dominated by their sense of what is important according to prior curricular experiences and their interpretation of institutional requirements or conditions.

Even though Gilbert, Netta, and Kam follow a conservative strategy of staying close to transfer requirements or core courses, each of these students show some knowledge of the college system or the content of general education courses. Gilbert is knowledgeable about what is needed to increase the likelihood of transfer to the University of California; Kam is aware of the content of academic courses that interest him; Netta can identify some core courses that are required for many majors. Other participants have far less knowledge about college courses, and are at loss as to how to begin thinking about course planning. Their approach is conservative only in the sense that they do not have the knowledge to assess counseling advice and may follow in a blind fashion. Jarvis and Oscar are two students who relied heavily on what
counselors presented to them in their first counseling session. Jarvis did not appear to know what to take his first semester (and the researcher’s impression was confirmed by the student in an interview a year later). And so he deferred to what his counselor thought were good choices.

Jarvis: I’m taking, ah Humanities, Math, English and History…Yeah because I talked to a counselor [who] told me what classes to take, what classes not to take. [And the counselor said based on your assessment tests you should take] English class and Math classes, yeah. [I picked humanities] um, well, Humanities were like, I guess you kinda like to observe things and like to expand your, your, um, kinda like questioning why and how. So that’s kinda good for you like when you’re architecturing, like, like, they come, in case a problem can comes up or some Like, okay, so what should we do next? How should we do it?

Jarvis wanted to learn about architecture, but he does not know what type of classes move him towards an exploration of this area. This lack of clarity is shown in his vague repetition of an explanation his counselor gives him about the connection between a general Humanities course and architecture.

Oscar is another student who is typical of those who have little knowledge of general education courses. Consequently he relied on the advice of his college counselor and peers. In his first semester, he signed up for three courses that he suspected do not align at all with his goal for attending community college, which is to learn graphic design.

Oscar: [The counselor] just gave me my classes because I was like, I want to major in graphic design but I don’t know what classes to take. So he just gave me some classes…Well, I chose Psychology because one of my friends, he went to [George] College and he told me that we had to take so much…general classes, so he told me Psychology is one of them so I might as well just take it. So I chose that to transfer. And um, the counselor, he gave a class called Psychosocial Health Problems in the Latino Community and…US and Mexico relations. Yeah. I [also] had this art class but [I] dropped it because the teacher wanted us to buy two books and it’s like a hundred something dollars each…Well, the counselor told me [the two classes] have something to do with graphic design but I don’t see the connection. I was trying—when I went to the counselor, I was saying, I want to major in graphic design but for now, I don’t know what classes contributed, you know, [to] majoring in graphic design. I was basically saying, I want to do, you know, wood technology…I want to do an art class. And he was like, no you can’t just go from place to place. You gotta go in straight path. He thought I was just
jumping from like just taking random classes.

A clear problem with the course choices Oscar “made” is that he does not see the connection between what he is interested in studying (graphic design) and what he is told he should take (Psychosocial Health and US and Mexico relations). Hearing that Oscar wants to eventually transfer to a four-year college, the counselor pushes him towards academic classes, the kind he believes an undocumented Latino youth would benefit from. Thus, several factors are at play in this complex scenario: Oscar knows little about academic general education courses and feels he should defer to those who theoretically know better. At the same time he is impatient to start on (or focus on) courses that help him deepen his knowledge of his chosen major. The counselor, on the other hand, pushes him towards academic courses, but doesn’t recognize the problem underlying the situation when students don’t understand why general education courses that do not directly relate to their vocational interests (or chosen major) should be taken. Taking courses unrelated to interests for an extended time, without knowing their eventual use, later contributed to Oscar, Jarvis, Kam, Gilbert, and other students’ decision to stop out from community college.

Brief counseling that rely exclusively on transfer or general education lists are inadequate to the task of meeting these students’ needs. Not having sufficient knowledge to make sense of the course options presented to them, students uncritically accept advice or fall back on prior conceptions of what is appropriate. Alaine is an example of how misconception, rather than complete lack of knowledge, influence course planning. She relied on her counselor’s list of General Education prerequisites because she presumed General Education requirements are like high school requirements in that they do not relate to one’s intended major (or, vocational

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29 Of this group, Gilbert did not officially stop out but instead disengaged in more subtle ways. It appears he started paying other people to write his papers and take his exams for him beginning his second year at community college.
interest). She thus decided to take an English class, an English lab supporting the transferable English course, African American history and Women’s Studies—courses she thought she could do well in since she has experience with them during high school. Her strategy reflects a desire to feel academic security, rather than to explore. Subsequently, her course work grew onerous quickly as it did not relate to her desire to become a real estate agent and learn how to do business. In response to the question of why she put herself in onerous classes, she says, “I know what I want to major in. I know I wanna major in business but you don’t do your major during [community] college.” Alaine’s approach to choosing courses is partially conservative—based on prior knowledge of courses she experienced—and partially based on a misconception that lower division courses are unrelated to upper division courses. It is unclear from interviews where she learned this idea, but we can guess that it may stem from her high school education (where course taking is dictated by graduation requirements) and talk surrounding community college education (a place for “getting prerequisites out of the way”). Here we see that students who rely on an approach that conserves prior curricular conceptions that do not align with the college context tend to see general education as a list of requirements. Yet, the first two semesters are crucial in the sense that students who have complicated academic histories (as documented in chapter three) view initial engagement with college as a “test” of their fit with the institution.

Not all participants approach transfer or general education requirements as merely lists. Some students begin to look into courses that interest them their first semester, within the IGETC or CSU General Education frame put forth by counselors. This student approach to course planning is more exploratory. Desiree, Kylie and Ellen are typical of students who begin to explore interests within the first semester, though they not certain yet what major they are
working towards. These students are similar to students cited above, yet distinct in that they express working towards an academic study by taking classes that seem interesting and relevant.

Desiree: When you take the assessment test, you take it for writing or English and math and it tells you what classes you should be placed in for English and math and I talked to a counselor and they tell me what classes are transferable. And they have this list that you have to take one of each...[I chose math, English and this other one]...cause [the class] sound interesting. I like, I mean they, when [the counselor] said that psychology is about learning about people and stuff and why they act the way they do. I don’t know, it interests me.

Kylie: Yeah, they give you like this list if you’re [aiming for] this [4-year college] and you need to take these classes [if] going with this school and you take those classes...Well, I took classes that will let me transfer and get them out of the way, so I chose those. Also, because I have ADHD...I wanna take psychology to see how our brain develops, how to deal with how we just are. I'm in Psychology, [transfer level] English and Health Science and [remedial] math.

Ellen: I have Math, English, Drama, and Psychology. I got psychology because they say Psychology is good for law... Yeah I am still [interested in studying law]. It is law or kids, and Psychology [applies] for both of them. But next semester...I’m switching [to the other campus]... cause they got the criminal law class I [want]. I’m thinking about starting [classes related to] my major [soon]... I just got general ed classes now. Everybody keeps saying “[General education] is on your way to the major” but it’s like you just [want to] start now. Just to get to see if you’re really interested.

What comes through in the commentaries made by Desiree, Kylie, and Ellen is that the IGETC and General education lists are not perceived necessarily as just requirements. There are requirements they must take, for sure, but these students also begin experimenting in their first semester with courses they intuit to be interesting. What may make the difference between self-driven experimentation and no experimentation is student background knowledge about both the general education choice set and the academic skills required for the study or vocation of interest. In the student statements above, we can see that counselors give students some information about the content of courses (usually in the form of a list of brief course descriptions), and students must draw on their own background knowledge to make connections
between what they think they might learn from the courses, and the topics or skills within their eventual undergraduate major and desired profession. The less knowledge students have about academic content and the skills they need, the more sophisticated counseling needs to be to compensate. To contrast with the above two groups of students, let’s examine a third group who have more knowledge or resources, and consequently can be more effective in the process of curricular planning.

Some students among the participants who go into college are more strategic: They find courses that they feel interested in, and make links between general education course content, upper division major, and professional career. In these ways, students such as Ella, May, Willow and Charles express their understanding of general education as a means to long term goals. Long term goals do not have to take concrete form, but rather act as a guide for course decision-making. Ella, an immigrant student who had internship experience with a consulate office, says she started to explore her professional interests through courses she signed up for her first semester:

Ella: I took up computer science [fall] semester [and international relations]. Well, when you enroll, they tell you that you have to take an assessment test…And then you take the test and then they tell you what [math and English] class to take…[To know what else to take] you have to enroll into counseling. Like a Freshman counseling. And like they tell you. Well, there’s something like a process. You take the assessment, [look at] classes and then [the counselor] ask you which is more likelier that you want to do to kinda like take classes that might interest you…You could choose anything you want and [then they] tell you well this class is transferable while this class is not…You’ve got like 10 minutes one-on-one with the counselor in the [counseling ]class to ask him why should I take this or take this? Like I’m interested in both but he tells you to just play along with whatever you might think interests you. He would tell you if it’s [transferable] or not. Well…I chose Computer Science because, like I said, that’s the thing I thought I wanted to do…And I chose International Relations too because like yeah going [to work at the consulate during] high school, I was kind of thinking of researching more on that…And I mean, you could [not take math and English the first semester] if you didn’t want to. But you’d still…I guess you need the credits to transfer.
In Ella’s description of the academic counseling she received starting her first term, we see that the counseling strategy employed by the college encourages students to follow their instinct about what academic courses are interesting first, and consider transfer guidelines second. For Ella, thinking about what the possible connections are between interesting courses and potential professions followed. She does consider completing prerequisites important—as reflected in her decision to take math and English right away—but she also balances prerequisites with two additional academic courses that help her explore knowledge that she believes are relevant to two different careers (technology and international relations) she is considering. Intellectual and vocational exploration is key to moving students forward in their college study, and so is careful planning so that students utilize limited resources efficiently. Ella said she learned at her community college that, “You can set up a meeting with the counselor and like, you could setup a vacation plan which is like-which classes you're going to take this semester and the next semester. It's like…it depends on you if you want to transfer in two years.” She engages, on her own, in thinking about what vocational and academic areas interest her, but also receives relevant guidance in the forms of encouragement (when she considers the importance of taking courses out of genuine interest versus meeting requirements) and sustained connection (when she is told to come back each semester by her counselor, who uses a positive metaphor to teach forward planning).

May is another student who illustrates the approach of integrating thinking about general education, upper division course-taking, and professions. She learned, prior to college, how to

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30 It can be argued that this counseling approach at Valley College prioritizes student curiosity over conditions fulfillment (i.e., meeting transfer requirements). An often cited counseling approach taken in the community college district that most participants attended but that Valley College does not belong to is one that puts the onus on the student to problem solve on her own. When students ask counselors what they should take, a common response given to students is, come back to counseling when you have chosen your courses.
approach college curricular planning—not as just meeting a list of transfer requirements but as exploration of academic areas.

May: I was following the IGETC program. Which is essentially a list of breathe requirements and if you complete IGETC then you’re able to just transfer to a UC or a CSU. It’s specifically for UC’s and CSU’s but it works for some other universities as well. If you have your IGETC complete it’s like you have all your undergraduate breadth requirements finished…Well, [my choice of] instructors that was pretty much random because I didn’t know any of the names but I went down the list of IGETC certified classes. And I just picked the ones that looked the most interesting to me. And so I like picked the introduction Ocean Sciences because I was interested in marine biology so I wanted to see if that would fit with what I’m interested I doing.

Similar to Ella, May focused on finding academic courses that seem interesting and at the same time balanced the exploration within the framework of IGETC transfer guidelines. The guidelines bound options in terms of disciplinary foci, and May made the link between her general education course choices and her interest in becoming a marine biologist.

For Willow and Charles, general education is also viewed as a window into upper division major courses and potential jobs. These students did not receive elaborate academic counseling at their colleges, but knew how to work backwards from their developing vocational goals. Willow believes that technology is important for her future and is interested in the business dimension. She explains her decision to enroll in computer science, English as a Second Language and math as follows:

Willow: [I picked my classes] because… Ok. Computers because… mmm… I don’t know much about computers, but I know that it’s very important… Very important. English is my second language; I have to learn it in order to work. And mathematics because I like it and, apart from that, I wanna study business. Yes, it was a decision I made myself… and also because I couldn’t do anything without knowing English and then I had to take English classes in order to know more…my counselor [from] high school [helped me].

Two of Willow’s classes moved her towards an exploration of majors for a career in technology and business (areas she perceives as important from observing her environment) while her third
class is fundamental to her success in all college classes. Similarly Charles is interested in law enforcement, from his experience with police officers in a community boys group, and discovered through web searches that Sociology majors study aspects of society and its relationship with individuals and groups: “Well, I [am interested in law and] was going to do Sociology major. So I needed Statistics and Sociology class...[also] Psychology.” All the courses he chose meet requirements for the Sociology major and at least two (Sociology and Psychology) would give him a better understanding of the content of his intended major. He began thinking about potential careers his first semester in college, and from there looked for academic majors that fit careers of interest. In this way Willow and Charles differ from May and Ella in that they pay more attention to reaching vocational outcomes through a college education. That is, their view of college is more instrumental and less about intellectual development. Yet, it can be argued that all these students are engaged in strategy that employs knowledge about academic disciplines and the specializations and core courses within them. They are then able to make links between academics and potential professions, and this understanding influences their curricular planning.

**Information pathways**

Starting in the first semester of enrollment, students are confronted with several developmental tasks. The first is to learn foundational concepts and practices of college life, including constructing one’s own educational plan. However, the process of learning how to be a college student is not an easy one in the community college setting. Specifically, the task of learning how to design one’s own education is supported in a very limited fashion by community colleges. The college district most of the participants attended tend to utilize only general education and transfer guidelines to transition students from a high school system that is highly
structured to a college system that is, in comparison, ill-structured, complex, and demands problem-solving on the part of the student. Counseling that does not recognize the varied needs of students and present course selection to students as merely a discrete task, done semester by semester without consideration of the interconnectedness among selections, does not appreciate the developmental nature of curricular planning. Moreover, academic counseling does not include career counseling, which may be the most effective means of structuring an educational plan for some students. Knowing the end goal provides a way to work backwards, to build knowledge and skills that are important to a desired profession.

Students who do not know how to make sense of their course options, and do not fully understand the implications of remedial placement for course planning and movement towards transfer, tend to fall back on their prior knowledge and information resources available through personal relationships (that is unconnected with community college agents). Learning how to obtain reliable information counselors and other staff (not all of whom are well prepared to answer questions, most students report) and how to develop mentoring relationships with faculty is not a simple task for many community college students. In the first semester, especially, the issue of learning how to navigate the community college system is salient in students’ discussions. A number of college features related to this issue were discussed in interviews: the commuter campus environment of community colleges; limited guidance; and the nature of information flow in this organizational setting.

The particular environment of community colleges is also a result of two features not yet discussed thus far—the commuter campus and the multiple missions of community colleges. These colleges serve many different groups with different educational goals, and transfer-oriented students are only one among a number. Thus, partly due to the various educational
missions, community college students have disparate experiences. Curriculum-wise, transfer-oriented students, also, are not forced (only advised) to begin their tenure at a two-year college with the assessment process, since non-transfer groups often do not need to take math and English, and community colleges have not developed a way to impose the assessment and counseling process on all who eventually transfer to four-year institutions. Transfer-oriented students can, in reality, move about as they wish (for example, enrolling in college-credit courses regardless of skill level). Students in this setting can take quite different paths, and have quite different experiences as a result.

As part of a commuter campus, community college students do not undergo a unifying social experience similar to those freshmen at four-year residential colleges who live in dormitories. Not having common social experiences makes it difficult to develop peer and other school-based supportive relationships. In addition, flexibility in course scheduling (which must be practiced by institutions that serve a wide range of students) may mean that students who take night courses encounter mostly busy adult students while those who take day courses encounter more traditional college youths, and that students often do not spend time on campus outside of class since flexibility of scheduling encourages practical use of time. Therefore, it is more challenging at these commuter two-year colleges to gain support, not only in the moral sense but also the instrumental sense. And for many of the research participants, it is the latter that is important. Xia, a student who reported earning nearly all A’s at college, says during her third semester that finding reliable information about courses and guidelines is still her biggest challenge.

31 “Practical use of time” refers to students’ scheduling classes around their commitments outside of school—such as jobs, family obligations, and personal lives developed outside of community colleges. Therefore, instead of selecting and organizing courses based on quality of instruction or campus location within a college district (which may result in an entirely different educational experience due to varying campus resources), students prioritize other commitments that do not necessarily support optimal academic choices.
Xia: To find out the information [is the biggest obstacle], to find out what classes I really need [for my major, for transfer] is very hard. All the people have different rumors, [my] peers the things they say have a thousand kinds of different versions, which one I should trust? I was so lost until I met the counselor at University of California.

Even for a motivated student such as Xia, finding information that she can trust or have confidence in is a challenge in a college environment where students have differing curricular experiences and no apparent single informational source for students to turn to. Ray, a student is not as academically strong, asserts (by the end of his first year) that the one service he would want to see at his community college is some sort of program to induct students into the community college system.

Ray: I don’t know, they should just make things more clear, they should have like a – I know they have tutors there but they should just have like a big after school program or something like that. [To offer] extra help, explain things more clearly how the – how the city college system works.

At an institution that offers such a vast array of programs for an entire community—not only transfer-oriented students—within a decentralized organizational framework, finding out what is an appropriate path for a particular goal is reported by students to be daunting.

The commuter campus environment is complicated by minimal college guidance, as previously documented. Transfer-oriented students who follow guidelines for assessment usually receive only brief academic counseling that focuses on the immediate task of putting together a course schedule for the first semester rather than planning for subsequent semesters or broader curriculum design. They do not get career counseling during this induction process. Because many of the academic counselors who interact with student participants do not communicate to students that academic counseling can help them design a broad educational plan (as opposed to
picking classes for the semester)\textsuperscript{32}, a plan that may span the domains of academic and career planning, students are often unaware of what help they could obtain from their respective college. Xia adamantly maintains that counseling in her community college district only offers generic information and technical help with getting into courses, a task she says she is more than able to do on her own.

\begin{quote}
Xia: Yeah I [did] everything online. I [signed up for] the classes online and found information online… Yeah [no help from] the counselors… they are just…I don’t know… [First semester] I talked to them but they just ask “what classes do you want to take…Okay ah you didn’t decide and when you decide what you want to take then you come back to see me.” You want [the counselor] to give you advice on what kind of classes to take [that is] appropriate for [this] major and [for that] but [they don’t]. Yeah that’s what I need. But they are just kind of lazy, just too busy or [something].
\end{quote}

In this statement, she asserts what other participants also experience: What students need but often don’t receive in community college is knowledgeable guidance to help them forecast disciplinary territory and move them effectively towards transfer.

Below is a map of students’ persistence patterns against first year experiences discussed in this chapter (reaction to remediation, formal counseling access, and informal advice). Similar to Tables 4.2 and 4.3, Table 4.4 is organized along students’ reaction to remediation, with the key addition of whether they obtained informal advice through personal channels, despite the difficulties the commuter environment at community colleges pose. (Remember, students who do not know how to make sense of their options and do not have good access to formal counseling tend to fall back on their prior knowledge and information resources available through personal relationships.)

\textsuperscript{32} The exception lies with one community college two participants attend that is not part of the community college district the others attend.
### Table 4.4: Profiles of students organized by their reaction to remediation, formal and informal advice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Formal counseling access</th>
<th>Informal advice (peers, faculty, etc.)</th>
<th>Persistence or departure at Point 1*, Point 2**, Point 3*** in community college</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accept remediation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willow</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lana</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desiree</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resist remediation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kylie</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Departure at Point 1, re-enroll later(^{33})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netta</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taeshe</td>
<td>More accessible</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tavis</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xia</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>Departure at Point 1, re-enroll later(^{33})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Uncertain/confused</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alaine</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dee</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kam</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Departure at Point 3, re-enroll later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>Departure at Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Randall</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>Less Accessible</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jarvis</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2, re-enroll later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damond</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>Departure at Point 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No remediation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilbert</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>More accessible</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Little/Moderate</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tavis</td>
<td>Less accessible</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Persistence up to Point 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{33}\) She persisted up to Point 3 after re-enrolling.

\(^{34}\) Persistence up to a point means that the student did not participate in an interview after that point, and enrollment status could not be verified with the student.
Conclusion

Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person (2006) argue that poor information dissemination and lack of structured curricular pathways in the community college setting contributes to attrition, comparing the counseling and other institutional procedures at vocational schools and with those at community colleges. As they point out, institutional procedures contribute to the overall college guidance students receive, which in turn affect their likelihood to reach their educational goals. The authors argue that community colleges could learn from the way technical colleges structure counseling and streamline the curriculum of their programs. Intrusive counseling and clear curricular pathways offer little room for missteps. The authors’ argument rests on a couple of assumptions. The first is that community college students are similar to vocational school students in that they are clear about what majors or vocations they are interested in, and are ready to go straight into these structured pathways, wanting to be steered precisely. The second is that community college students who aim for transfer may also be well served by such pathways.

Streamlined programs and clear institutional pathways are important in facilitating program completion, as the authors’ research and this study show, but the curricular exploration that precedes enrollment in these tracks are important, too. In this study, of the forty youths who volunteered to participate in interviews, twenty-seven stated during senior year in high school that they were interested in experimenting with different courses or areas of study during their first year in college. (That is 68% of the total.) Of the thirty who decided to enroll the academic year after high school, eighteen continued to experiment with courses past the first semester, to
narrow their down possible major/vocation options. (That is 60% of n.) These numbers suggest that transfer-oriented community college students are likely to try various courses before committing to a track of study. Such experimentation is better facilitated by a career counselor along with an academic advisor, rather than the type of counseling performed at the technical colleges that create very clear pathways but also offer no space for experimentation. Thus, clear curricular pathways is only one piece of the solution to improving community college student success. Another is counseling and adjunct student services that may assist new college students in learning about college and finding a guiding focus for academic study.

Finding a guiding focus for academic study is not easy for many students since liberal arts general education is not meant to be clearly tied to specific vocations. Experiencing this, many of the participants—who are working class and low income youths—express a strong need to see the connection between their college education and their intended vocation. Ironically, this need is strong during the first year when students are encouraged to try a variety of general education courses. Finding an appropriate vocation or career, however, requires experimentation with a variety of things—course work, applied work, and exploration of job markets. It may be that economic exigencies for many community college students are not conducive to full exploration. As one student, Lana, puts it, you have to eat before you can study. Thus, many working class students devote a good portion of their time to jobs that only reward in a monetary sense, rather than study or career exploration. It may be that students’ perception of the relationship between college and work—crystallized in the sentiment oft expressed in high school, “college prepares you for work” (a vocation-oriented philosophy of higher education) —

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35 These numbers may be higher if the group of forty did not include undocumented and very weak high school students who are very aware of the limitations they face as they move forward from high school. They do not engage in academic/major exploration in the same way as other students because they do not believe that such exploration is compatible with their life chances.
sets or does not set them up for academic exploration. Or, it may be that academic subjects such as literature, philosophy, psychology, and sociology are too distant from known vocations and perhaps a leap for students with weak high school preparation. (Such subjects are alternately described by struggling students as “boring” or overwhelming.) Whatever the factors, low income and weak students have the most trouble with college academic counseling which merely urge them to explore general education courses without consideration of how these courses might move them towards a concrete professional goal. A more effective approach to college guidance needs to consider both students’ need for structure (i.e., clear curricular pathways) and their need for intellectual and personal exploration.
Divergent Pathways of Community College Students

When student participants joined this study in their senior year, they looked forward to completing high school and embarking on a new journey, one that they had expected would take them closer to their postsecondary goal and adult status. Community college offered them, as they perceived it, access to multiple opportunities, including the chance to obtain a baccalaureate down the road. As documented in chapter four, during the first semester participants encountered new experiences within the community college environment that tested their expectations or knowledge of college life. The challenges of the secondary to postsecondary transition they experienced subsequent to college enrollment ranged from academic preparation to college environmental conditions. Of these conditions, several key structural features of the community college environment were examined in the prior chapter; this chapter focuses on student persistence outcomes over the period of eighteen months following high school and students’ understanding of their decision making around withdrawal or persistence. Researchers using national data sets have documented community college persistence data, estimating as little as 53% of first time community college freshmen in 2005 returning for their sophomore year (Bottoms and Young, 2008).

The experiences of participants in this study also show that the college pipeline leaks significantly within the first year of community college enrollment, and not during the summer break period between high school and college. A second key finding is that access to academic mastery is central to a student’s decision to continue participation in

1 More recent analyses of data drawn from the Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS) 2002-2006 panel show two-year college students were more likely to be no longer enrolled within the first two years of enrollment (29.5% of community college entrants left without credentials versus 10.5% of four-year entrants) (Oseguera, 2012).
college, and this pattern becomes apparent after the student accrues experience in at least several academic courses. Further, when a student experiences academic obstacles and loses her personal support system, she is much more likely to withdraw from college. Finally, a fourth finding is that different students engage in varied degrees of help-seeking behavior. Help-seeking is found more often among persisters rather than leavers who experienced academic obstacles.

**Patterns of Enrollment over Time**

The enrollment behavior of student participants shows that entering community college is not the largest problematic area in the college pipeline; rather, progress in terms of college course enrollment and completion is the area where we see participants struggle. As stated in chapter five, of the forty students who initially joined this study as seniors in 2006-07, thirty students went on to enroll in community college the following academic year (by summer of 2008). That means the majority (or 75%) of the original sample followed through with their stated intent of enrolling in community college immediately after high school. However, by the end of fall 2008 (approximately eighteen months after high school), of the thirty-two\(^2\) students from the original sample who reported community college enrollment, thirteen or 40.6% of the enrollees had withdrawn at some point in that eighteen month time period\(^3\). Clearly, the experience of first year attendance at community college is a rocky process for many. Table 1 maps the trajectory of students’ postsecondary participation over four points in time after expected high school graduation—summer of 2007 (the summer immediately following expected graduation), fall of 2007 (the first semester of expected community college enrollment), spring 2008, summer of 2008, and fall of 2008.

\(^2\) Two more students, Emme and Connie, enrolled in the fall of 2008.

\(^3\) My number falls between the estimations given by Bottoms and Young (2008) and Oseguera (2012).
Table 5.1: Trajectory of students’ postsecondary participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Summer ‘07</th>
<th>Fall ‘07</th>
<th>Spring ‘08</th>
<th>Summer ‘08</th>
<th>Fall ‘08</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduated high school</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never enrolled</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in CC</td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed enrollment</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrew</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attrition from study</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A few notes need to be made about the terms in Table 1 first. “Participation” is a category that refers to students’ school-related enrollment behavior. Did they, for instance, report graduating from high school and enrolling in community college (CC) at any of the four points in time (summer of 2007, fall of 2007, spring of 2008, summer of 2008, or fall of 2008)? The terms “enrolled” and “delay enrollment” mean that enrollment and participation in course(s) occurred throughout the specified term or these actions did not occur then. “Withdrew” refers to withdrawing from course(s) and ending college attendance after having enrolled and participated for some time prior to withdrawing. A student could, for example, withdraw during the middle of a term or she could withdraw from college altogether after having finished a term. Withdrawal sometime during a given term was counted as a withdrawal during that term. Withdrawal after completing courses for a term was also counted as a withdrawal in that term. No distinction is made in this table between students withdrawing from college altogether or stopping-out for a period of time, since stopping out turned out (in reality) to be withdrawal altogether after some
time for some participants. These behavioral categorizations are based on students’ reports. In addition, the numbers listed in each category reflect the number of students who took the specified action during that time period; these numbers are not cumulative. (For example, eighteen students enrolled in community college during the fall of 2008, down from nineteen students in spring but up from fifteen in summer of 2008.) The last category under the participation column, “attrition from study,” refers to the fact that the researcher had lost contact with the student participant or the student had decided not to continue participating in the study. Finally, “summer of 2008” was included as a point in time, even though many of the participants did not enroll in summer courses. This category allowed the inclusion of one student who started his enrollment during that time and one student who stated he withdrew from college attendance altogether at that time (though he eventually returned to college the fall after that summer). Students who enrolled and participated in courses during the spring and fall of 2008 but not summer of 2008 were counted as continuous enrollment in summer of 2008 (if they did not report any decision to withdraw during those periods).

Table 5.1 shows several important aspects of persistence patterns. While there is a bit of leakage in the college pipeline at the start (before the fall of 2007), the substantial attrition happens between the end of the first (fall of 2007) and the second semester (spring of 2008). In other words, the loss of students happens very quickly. It appears that many do not persist continuously if they decide the institution is not a good fit, or if they decide the enterprise is not feasible (at least, not in the foreseeable future). In all, 41.9% of students (or, thirteen of the thirty-one enrollees—those enrolled by summer of 2008) who experienced community college
for at least one term had withdrawn from the system at some point. This statistic falls in line with what other researchers have found in two-year college persistence data. A summary of the attrition pattern is given in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2: Proportion of participating students who leave college

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>N = 40</th>
<th>Summer ‘07</th>
<th>Fall ‘07</th>
<th>Spring ‘08</th>
<th>Summer ‘08</th>
<th>Fall ‘08</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cumulative # enrolled in CC</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion who withdrew</td>
<td>1/27 (3.7%)</td>
<td>11/29 (37.9%)</td>
<td>12/30 (40%)</td>
<td>11/32 (34.3%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Accounting for Patterns of Enrollment

Three factors emerge as explanations for the observed patterns of enrollment. Two of these factors—a student’s level of academic preparedness and a student’s familial and life circumstances—are individual factors that can affect the student's performance and the availability of support (i.e., academic and social supports outside of college and conditions that influence students’ health, safety and well-being) as she progresses through college. Individual-level factors are, of course, supported or not by the college context in which the student develops. Thus, a third factor encompasses the institutional features specific to community college, such as counseling, academic supports, and college climate, that may or may not be adequate to the task of moving students forward. This chapter attends to both the individual and institutional factors in its examination of students’ rationales for their college participation choices.

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4 The percentage of students who withdrew during that period is calculated by adding up the number of students who do decide to withdraw or stop out by the given term and dividing that number by the total number who enrolled by the term.
The unit of analysis in this chapter is college participation behavior: enrolled or not, and if not, at which point does disenrollment occur. This approach of organizing the discussion by participation behavior allows the reader to look at college participation as a single phenomenon that is motivated by a multitude of factors. At the end, I re-consider the ways students respond to academic issues and life challenges to tease apart the influence of prior academic preparedness, familial and life circumstances, and the institutional features of community college.

**Individual Resources, College Contexts, and College Participation**

Four categories of college participation patterns can be used to illustrate how students are positioned to manage the challenges of community college. The first category is *non-entrants*. The four students who decided soon after the end of high school not to enroll in community college make up this group. The second category is *early leavers*, made up of five students who withdrew from community college by the beginning of spring (what would be their second term) with no clear plans of returning, and a sixth who withdrew during fall but returned by the start of spring. The third category is *late leavers*. Those who leave between the spring and summer of 2008 fall in this category. Finally, the sixteen students who persist without withdrawing in or before the fall of 2008 make up the last group called *persisters*. The following sections present

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5 Three more students report withdrawal in the term following their third semester (fall 2008), but they are not counted here as later leavers because the study is bounded at eighteen months after high school.

6 Seven students are not accounted for among the non-entrants, early leavers, late leavers, and “persisters”. The researcher lost contact with three (Bea, Jenn, Niki) after the first interview and four more (Desiree, Sharon, Netta, and Ellen) after the second interview. Therefore, Bea, Jenn, Niki could fall into any of the four enrollment categories. Desiree, Sharon, Netta, and Ellen could either fall in the category of later leavers or “persisters.” It appears that at least some of these students were having difficulties while in community college. They did not respond to calls made by the researcher, though one—Desiree—spoke to the researcher a few times over the phone during the summer and early fall of 2008. She reported completing one year at community college but was going through personal difficulties (unclear if they included both home and school issues) and did not want to participate in interviews at that time. She did not verify her enrollment status for fall of 2008. In Sharon’s case, her mother (whom Sharon lived with) reported that Sharon was enrolled in a vocational program at the local community college in spring of 2008 but was too busy with her baby for additional commitments.
an examination of the individual-level and institutional factors that influence students’ ability to enroll, progress and achieve in community college.

*Non-entrants*

The subgroup that perhaps best illustrates the impact of individual-level factors on college participation are those who never entered the community college system during the duration of this study, despite their intent to do so. Typical of other participants who are low income or working class and minority, four students—Joseph, Michael, Sonny, and Quin—contended with both weak academic preparation and weak financial support. These four are similar to one another in that they see their academic and financial difficulties as significant obstacles, and without the two key foundations to support advanced study, they felt they were not well positioned to succeed in community college. Thus all chose to enter the workforce or the armed services, though two (Quin and Sonny) indicated that postsecondary education would be a possibility down the road. Joseph and Michael, both recent immigrants from Latin America, struggled with learning English in high school. They reported that the difficulties they experienced in the high school ESL programs\(^7\) affected their access to curriculum in other core courses, and their poor overall academic performance in turn influenced their thinking about the potential for pay off of community college. Sonny and Quin were not recent immigrants but rather second generation Cambodian-American and Vietnamese-American (respectively) who grew up in urban neighborhoods surrounding Roosevelt High. Although they did not experience the substantial language barriers that Joseph and Michael did, they, too, also had academic difficulties during high school. Their spotty academic records also contributed to their lack of belief in their likelihood of success in community college. It is important to note that three of the

\(^7\) Michael elaborated on his difficulties as partly a result of the programmatic changes that happened each year. The discontinuities in terms of adopted curriculum and standards regulating movement along levels contributed to students’ difficulties moving up to more advanced ESL courses at Roosevelt High.
four youths (Sonny, Joseph, and Michael) did not pass their high school exit exams. The following statements illustrate the youths’ perspective of their academic preparation and college potential:

Joseph: I’m not sure if I’m going to graduate this year because I have bad grades…I haven’t passed the CAHSEE…Yeah, it’s hard for Latinos, it’s hard…I [immigrated when] I was like fifteen years old…Right here in this center, the college career center, they are telling me if you don’t graduate you can go to community college because it’s important for you. Don’t give up cuz you don’t graduate. And so I told them I was interested in that and it’s a better idea. If I give up I don’t know what happens. Maybe I go to work but I would have to work hard.

Joseph (later): Now this job I took like two months ago because I saw I didn’t pass the CAHSEE and I said if I’m not graduating what am I doing? I have to get a job to get experience.

Michael: Everyone says I should go to [community college]. [But] I’m not really informed about it…I haven’t asked for help because when I tried asking for help, [the counselor] was always busy…[Haven’t tried teachers], I feel it’s useless to go to them. I feel-I feel they aren’t going to help me…To go to a community college, I [can]. To go to a university, I don’t think so. Because I think [community college is] easier, because of money and everything. To go to university I need to have papers and all that…like residence…It’s the most stressful thing in the world…I haven’t [inquired into assistance], I feel it’s impossible. I’m not prepared [for academics]. I’m a bit dumb, haha.

Sonny: I got to try to pass the CAHSEE first…You know, like high school comes first, then college, in [that] order.

Sonny (later): I don’t wanna go to [community college] class and like there’s people younger than me and they think I’m dumb or something.

Quin: Cause just writing down and [classroom] learning is not for me.
What differentiates non-entrants from those who enrolled in community college but abandoned their intentions later is the combination of significant academic troubles\(^8\) with economic exigencies, and in Michael’s case, citizenship (undocumented) status.

The role of family is a significant factor in first- and second generation immigrant youths’ decision-making regarding finance and the affordability of college. Joseph and Michael, who were both recent immigrants, had families that struggled to live. Both families were large—Michael had eleven older siblings and Joseph is among seven siblings. The older children all worked to help their parents and themselves. Though his parents advocated for school, Joseph felt that working, saving, and building up financial credit would gain him more security in the long run, given his lack of success in the school setting. Michael allowed us another view into the psychology of those living in poverty: “Because of the economic situation, sometimes it’s like I wanna work and have everything I want. And then if I go to school, I won’t be able to do that—like working full time and gain money and buy everything…get everything I want.” From this interview, he repeated several times the sentiment held by many of his peers—being able to have what you want. In Michael’s case, money may relieve material basic needs as well as insecurities and social stigma related to his racial/ethnic, citizenship, and socioeconomic status.

Sonny and Quin, while not the oldest children in their families, were the only children left at home and both expressed a need to assist their parents financially. Sonny had five older siblings, and of the five, only one brother completed high school and enrolled in a vocational program at a community college. Despite having the intention to enroll in community college and pursue a vocation his parents would approve of, Sonny did not do so, even two years after leaving high school. He explained his inaction alternately as resulting from one, trying to retake

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\(^8\) In Quin’s case, it is not so much that he felt he had difficulty learning (though he earned a below-C average his first two years in high school, by senior year he improved his grades substantially he said). It is that he felt the classroom pedagogy he experienced throughout his years in school did not work for him.
and pass the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) and summoning the will to go to school with others who are more academically skilled than he; and two, working to support himself and assisting his parents. Like Sonny, Quin was also the youngest in his family and felt the need to financially support his mother since his three older siblings struggled financially and his father had passed. In senior year, he thought he could only realistically consider public two-year colleges or the Marines, given his financial constraints and prior academic experiences. Working within a poor financial aid guidance structure in high school, Quin leaned towards the choice that would allow him the opportunity to secure financial support for his mother. Thus, in the end, he favored the Marines over community college after high school graduation.

**Early leavers**

Unlike the four who decided not to enter the community college system, early leavers are a mixed group in that they report a wide variety of reasons for abandoning their intentions to continue with community college, including personal interests, finance, citizenship, college adjustment difficulty, and academics. As shown later, they are also distinct in this way from late leavers whose decisions for withdrawal tended to center on academic considerations. In all, six students make up this group: One, Willow, left due to lack of financial support; another, Jim, was incarcerated for burglary; a third, Oscar, changed his education plans after considering his undocumented status; a fourth, Art, left to pursue other interests; and a fifth, Damond, withdrew for academic reasons. The sixth student, Kylie, is placed in this group though she is different from the rest in that she only stopped out briefly. Early leavers, as a group, reflect the diversity of the community college student body. Table 5.3 summarizes the reasoning and plans of the two categories of students discussed thus far.
Table 5.3: Characteristics of two groups organized around persistence behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persistence pattern</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Reason for leaving</th>
<th>Near-future goals</th>
<th>Alternate path</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Art</td>
<td>4. Personal interest</td>
<td>4. Travel</td>
<td>4. To be determined</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within the group of early leavers⁹, Willow and Oscar are most similar to the non-entrants in that they perceived their individual circumstances as such that their chances for postsecondary education were limited.

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⁹ The tables in this chapter do not distinguish between those who leave provisionally (stop outs) and those who leave with no plans of returning (drop outs) to community college. Some of the students who made plans to return to community college within a semester or two never did so during the duration of the study. Thus, practically speaking, the line between stop outs and drop outs is blurry and not pursued here. Also, in the third column, the reasons provided are the ones that students give when asked towards the beginning of their second or third interview (depending on the timing of withdrawal) what their enrollment status is and why they decided to leave.
success—defined as the ability to proceed, reach graduation and obtain their professional goal—are very low. They decided to withdraw from college near the start of the pipeline due to financial difficulties that related to their immigration history. Though the public perceives community colleges as affordable, the experiences of low income students from this study indicate that community college turns out to be too expensive for some, and that financial aid (when one can get it) for community college students is inadequate. Willow and Oscar are first and second generation immigrant youths (respectively) from Latin America, whose enrollment in community college from the very beginning was difficult. Willow came to the U.S. at the age of fifteen, and by the start of college, her mother had to return to their home country while Willow stayed on with her mother’s domestic partner in the U.S. Though she enjoyed her one semester at community college (especially her computer science course), she felt that the demands of working full time (she first worked as an on-call janitor, before landing a full-time job at a bakery) and keeping house for her mother’s partner was too taxing for her to be able to continue with community college. After finishing her fall courses, she decided to withdraw to study ESL at a no-cost adult school program, with plans of returning to college in the future.\footnote{Willow stated in her last interview that her long-term goal is still a four-year college degree. She could not, however, shoulder so much responsibility and take college-level courses at the same time. Thus she imagined that she will be able to return to community college after her mother “fixes her immigration papers” and returns to the US in a year or two. In the meantime, Willow attends adult school four days a week to work on her English language skills that will prepare her for college study later.}

Oscar shares Willow’s problem of financial insecurity, but differs in his status as an undocumented person. During his first semester, he enrolled in four courses but only kept two. In the spring, he enrolled in two classes though quickly dropped the one requiring expensive material. From the start, Oscar reported course materials from both terms to be a significant
burden hard to manage\textsuperscript{11}. Yet, it was not until early spring when he enrolled in courses that would move him towards his education goal of graphic design study (his desired profession)\textsuperscript{12} that he faced more directly his job prospects without documentation. He repeated during interviews, “what [do] I do- pass and graduate and get my diploma, and be unable to work?” His financial difficulties\textsuperscript{13} may have made progressing with courses difficult, but it was his feelings of hopelessness over the lack of a pathway to citizenship (at the time) that was the critical factor in his decision to discontinue college participation. By early spring of his first year, he only kept an introductory computer literacy course, which he had taken in high school\textsuperscript{14}. Thereafter he decided to withdraw from college with no clear plans of returning. College participation (however brief) and timing of withdrawal are indicative of a convergence of factors, but especially immediate environmental context, financial stability, and academic preparedness. Of note, Oscar and Willow differ from non-entrants in that they were better positioned to complete community college courses: They don’t have adequate financial support but they do have a more

\textsuperscript{11} This view is held by Willow and other low income participants. Books and materials often cost much more than the courses themselves.

\textsuperscript{12} In his first semester, Oscar was enrolled in four courses that the counselor chose for him: Psychology, Health Issues in the Latin Community, US-Latin Relations, and Spanish Literature. Oscar had stated an intention to transfer and take transferable courses (language he said he learned from a few friends) to the counselor, but he reported that he did not know what general education meant and how to choose classes. By spring, he knew to choose courses that directly support his goal of studying graphic design.

\textsuperscript{13} Oscar explained his financial difficulties in individual and contextual terms. He had great difficulty obtaining work (the kinds he was more interested in, not just construction where undocumented persons are more protected) without a social security number; his father (an undocumented person) also began to get less work and accrue more debt with the onset of the recession, which led to conflicts and instability within the family. Another layer of challenge is found in Oscar’s attempt to engage in activities associated with transition to adulthood. Driving, for instance, introduced a larger sense of danger and vulnerability that Oscar did not experience to the same degree during his adolescence. Using an incident with highway patrol as instantiation, Oscar said he feels like a “prey,” because “there are always predators out there to get you… [You are] kind of like a criminal. You’re like always watching your back. You’re not a criminal, but you are- you’re considered a criminal.”

\textsuperscript{14} Oscar is categorized as an early leaver as opposed to a late leaver because he indicated towards early spring he was no longer engaged with the goal of obtaining a postsecondary degree. This stands in contrast with late leavers who clearly stated in spring that their goal was still an AA degree or transfer to a four-year college, even if some of them were repeating courses from the fall in the spring (Wayne, Jordan and Randall). Oscar only stayed with the computer literacy course, which he had already taken in high school, so that he would not have to pay for the cost of printing at his local library; he was aware the course did not contribute to building new knowledge and enrollment in the course did not signify for him an intention to stay in college.
solid academic foundation (compared to non-entrants) to succeed in their academic courses. This difference may explain why they attempted college rather than pursue alternative paths immediately after high school.

Three students in this group illustrate the variety of motivations for early withdrawal among community college students. As a group, community college students come from quite varied socioeconomic and academic backgrounds, with diverse intentions. Art is a well-spoken youth from Washington High who reported no academic difficulties. He dabbled in community college for one semester to please his parents before definitively making the decision to leave for travel. Jim, on the other hand, commuted a long distance to a neighboring community college district in order to separate himself from negative peer pressure (“friends…[who are] going to take me off task”), but ended up in trouble with the law by early spring\(^\text{15}\). Unlike Art and Jim who left the community college system, Kylie intended only to stop out, not completing her first semester and repeating those classes the following term. Her decision to do so was motivated by stress over adjusting to community college while managing a new job\(^\text{16}\). The diversity in student body, then, requires that community college persistence, as one type of student outcome, be examined with educational intent as a consideration.

Academics is the most common issue reported by students who changed their college-going intentions (including later leavers), and one student among the early leavers illustrate the importance of prior academic preparation in shaping students’ ability and motivation to problem solve academic challenges that arise in college. Damond reported academic-related issues as his primary reason for leaving community college after one semester. He found his weak academic

\(^{15}\) In high school, Jim believed his lack of financial support and negative peer influence as the two main obstacles to his postsecondary success. His prediction appears to have substance—in the spring of 2008, his friend Wayne reported Jim in jail for burglary. The researcher was unable to reach Jim after his first semester (fall 2007) in community college, when the burglary and incarceration supposedly occurred.

\(^{16}\) In addition, Kylie has ADHD which she reports to be a contributing factor.
performance in college to be a strong enough reason to stop out to examine his circumstance. In addition to unexpectedly finding similarities between college remedial courses and high school courses, Damond spoke of ineffective study habits, testing anxiety and his limited ability to access college course content as complications during his short time at community college.

When asked about his decision to stop-out from community college, he responded as such:

    Damond: I think like I just needed to learn how to get more organized first before I went back. I had like trying to stop my habits of being like unorganized, lazy and all that stuff. I see I wasn’t really… I was passing but barely. So I was like if I take a break and get more organized, like work a little bit more at my job and stuff like that and get a little more money to get a car, then I would be more like, then I can go to you know instead of [College L] go to [College A] and then take more courses over there.

Damond’s decision to take some time off after his first semester is couched within his goal of reflecting upon and modifying individual traits—specifically his study/organizational habits—as well changing one context variable—the college itself. Later, he elaborated on how being “lazy,” as he puts it, is a process of losing interest in classroom routines and of not being excited by his intended major, once he experienced its gatekeeper course. This process of becoming bored and unfocused involved habits he developed in prior years of schooling and his stress in evaluative situations at school.

At the start of the academic year, Damon had just graduated from high school, very excited to start college. Though he had struggled in school before, during his last two years at Roosevelt High, he was involved in a mentoring program and was encouraged to think of himself as a college-going student. He started community college in the fall of 2007 by enrolling in (remedial) math, (remedial) English, and Economics, thinking he should start off with an introductory economics class, which he saw as directly related to his intended major, business,

17 Many of the participants who took remedial math and/or English were unsure about the numbering of their course, and so the researcher could not ascertain how far below first-year the course is. Arithmetic, for instance, is years from (first year level) Calculus while Advanced Algebra is only a short distance away.
and two classes that would ease him into college. (Damond, like other students, thought English and math are good basic courses to start college with.) A few weeks in, he dropped English due to the time demands of his work schedule and his reliance on public transportation. He thought he could handle math and Economics, but about a month into the semester he started to become disengaged:

Like I was doing [fine] for like the first I say 3 or 4 weeks but then I started tiring down. I started getting a little bit lazy and stuff like that…Yeah I kind of lost interest… When I first went I was psyched for it. I was like yeah I’m going to do this, pay attention and everything and write notes, a lot of notes and everything. I did that at first but then like after a while it became routine. So then it became like boring. It’s hard to pay attention when you think you’re doing the same thing every day…[Class] activities were [varied] but it wasn’t as exciting or interesting as it was at first to me. I guess it became kind of like high school, oh I have to go to this class again.

Here, Damond focuses on the routines of classroom learning as a disengaging process. When probed, he gives his instructors credit for varying activities, though the one class activity most salient to him is taking notes, which is a rather passive learning activity. We get a clue of how classroom learning has been “boring” for Damond through an excerpt from his high school interview, when he spoke of the relationship he sees between academic disciplines and real life:

“Ah, I know [college] is [going to be] hard and it’s gonna take a lot of work…You have to learn things that you ain’t even gonna to need in the future or you ain’t gonna use.” This comment suggests that it may not necessarily be his chosen major that is wrong for him (though that could be the case), but it might be access to academic curriculum that has been the problem for years.

Moreover, remedial education (as conceived in many settings) can exacerbate the negative feelings academically underprepared students can have towards the college classroom. Damond observed that taking his remedial math and English classes “was basically kind of doing freshman year in high school. You basically learn everything over you know…” This comment is striking in its similarity to other participants’ observations of their remedial courses. Damond
elaborates, “It’s kind of like going to summer school for the things you didn’t do well. To me like the first time I went to like the math class it was like I already know it but then they teach me something I probably forgot.” The repetition of subjects at the same level, as a result of breaks in learning due to summer (and programmatic/staffing issues\textsuperscript{18} in high school), can be a deterrence to motivation, suggested students, because they spend so much time repeating material instead of being pushed to learn more effectively at a faster pace. In this way, community college remediation is often delivered in an ineffective manner. Hence a number of students in remedial education described school as moving very slowly. And, as hinted earlier, in addition to the repetition of subject level matter, another type of continuity from high school may be at play in some community college classrooms. Damond noted that while there is variation in certain classroom activities (“In high school we just read the book, in college we had to take notes”), he indicated that a kind of passivity in classroom learning remains. Like other youths in this sample Damond feels that he’s “more of a person who likes to go out and [learn by] doing than just sitting somewhere and learning about it.”

Interestingly, the class context evoked for Damond habits that derailed his school focus and learning. That is, along with the loss of focus that he started to experience about a month into the semester, he also started to fall back on behavior patterns he developed prior to coming to community college.

Damond: Like the habits from high school followed me to college. Sometimes not showing up [to class] on time, like over sleeping. Not paying attention a lot, and if I didn’t understand a question I…[will] sometimes [say] \textit{whatever}, instead of raising my hand and asking like can you say it over again?… You know how in high school you just, how they talk a lot and you just put your head on your hands and just like kind of drift off? Yeah that’s the type of stuff [I would do]. Yeah it’s hard to stop. Then sometimes you don’t recognize

\textsuperscript{18} Some students from Roosevelt and Wilson High complained during their high school interviews about the disruption in learning due to staffing issues (i.e., months-long, sometimes year-long, substitute teaching).
you’re doing it and stuff like that.

The habits from high school that derailed his focus and learning included tardiness, disengagement from class activities, and passive reception of information (i.e., not raising hand and engaging with instructor and peers). These habits likely arose in previous years in response to unproductive classroom experiences. Above, he describes remembering teachers’ talk as a kind of noise, if you will, that made him “put [his] head on [his] hands and just like kind of drift off.” If it is the case that he adapted to prior schooling experiences with certain habits to minimize his confusion and discomfort, it is not so hard to imagine that similar contexts will evoke those behavior patterns. Damon’s astute observation about the unconscious nature of habits reminds us that ineffective study habits are not easy to change without additional supportive interventions.

Another component of his boredom had to do with the anxiety-provoking evaluative situations in college. One can imagine that for students who experienced prior schooling as negative, future evaluative situations would not elicit positive feelings. Damond reported that the good part of the semester was at the beginning while the worst part included testing.

Damond: Probably when like the tests came around and stuff like that. And then I have to like buckle down and study…You know how they go over a subject on the test and everything, it’s like it seemed like they put a lot of pressure and stuff into it and I thought too much in my head about it. So then I became like less interested in it. So then it became more like boring.

Boredom, it seems, can mean more than simply lack of interest in a subject. Through Damond’s statements, we get a better idea of what students like him are trying to communicate when they say they are bored in school. Boredom can mean not having the tools to access curriculum in a meaningful way. It can mean repetitive activities and passive learning. It can also mean testing anxiety that changes the relationship a student has with the academic subject. We can infer the
relationships among these variables: Less productive, repetitive activities can hinder real access to curriculum, leading to lack of academic preparation and poor testing outcomes, which in turn feed the cycle of testing anxiety.

To map the commonalities and distinctions among students discussed here, Table 4 elaborates on the category of early leavers. The details embedded within students’ reasoning around their participation decisions are coded below in the “resources” category. Essentially, resources refer to the range of knowledge, tools, values, supports, and settings that enable student success and persistence in college courses. For example, Willow’s reference to her genuine enjoyment of her computer science course, which contributed to her positive evaluation of her community college experience, is catalogued as an enabling resource. That is, the academic preparation she obtained from that course is a motivating source that would have kept her in the community college system if not for her financial situation. On the other hand, Damond spoke of study habits and skills that he had not developed to help him succeed in college courses, and so study habits/skill set is listed as a resource needed for him. Damond did not know that he would need to take remedial courses that turned out to be very similar to high school courses he had already taken; therefore, community college expectations is catalogued. Below, greater detail in the category of “resources needed” is given for Damond because he pointed to academic-related issues as the driver for his withdrawal. Given readers’ interest in the college domain, specifics are necessary to identify which aspects of the education process matter to students.

19 Details provided in Table 4 come from the second or third interviews, depending on the timing of students’ withdrawal decisions. The one exception is Jim, who only spoke with the researcher over the phone towards the end of fall 2007 (when he confirmed having been enrolled in the community college that he planned for during senior year and completing a few courses). He did not participate in any college interviews however. Thus, the details provided below for Jim are gathered from his high school interview.
Table 5.4: Early leavers’ expressed reasons for leaving and their reported resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early leavers</th>
<th>Reason for leaving</th>
<th>Enabling Resources</th>
<th>Resources needed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Incarceration</td>
<td>2. Mother’s encouragement</td>
<td>1b. Family support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Damond</td>
<td>5. Academics</td>
<td>5. Desire better life</td>
<td>3a. Pathway to citizenship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that Table 5.4 is not meant to be an exhaustive list of students’ resources; rather the table catalogues factors that students highlight in their explanations of their college experiences.

\(^{20}\) Academic preparation, as opposed to prior academic preparation, is a broader code that includes both prior academic preparation and the academic preparation that the student reports receiving in college.

\(^{21}\) The code *desire better life* is derived from students’ narratives of what it means to have a better life (documented in chapter 3). Participants’ models of “better life” are significantly shaped by their race/ethnicity, class, and immigrant or native status backgrounds.

\(^{22}\) Within the college access literature, study habits and college expectations are sometimes put together in the general category of “college knowledge.” However, specifying the components adds value here. The dominant pattern of participants’ confusion (or frustration) with the community college practices of assessment, remediation, and academic counseling (which does not direct them in the same way high school academic counseling does) points to the importance of particular college knowledge. Note though that it is misleading to discuss college knowledge as only a kind of generic knowledge that can be divorced from context. Specifically, currently each community college conducts assessment and the practice of remediation (placement, curriculum, program policies) its own way. So students would need to gain knowledge of a particular system to say they have strong college knowledge.
The codes *resources that enable* and *resources needed* are the researcher’s analytic coding of student narratives of their community college experiences. These codes differ from the codes in other tables in that the student may not have articulated a full awareness of the issue at hand but patterns in their narratives emerged. Table 5.7, for example, reports *perceived obstacles* which is a code for obstacles perceived by and reported by students.

**Late leavers**

The students who belong to the category of late leavers are distinct from the early leavers in two respects: Late leavers are more homogenous as a group compared to early leavers, and when loss of college support occurs, its timing differs. First, most late leavers show that their withdrawal decisions reflect consideration of their discouraging academic experiences. Because they stay in the community college system longer, their academic difficulties are drawn out over a longer period of time (compared to early leavers). Drawn out academic difficulties, then, become more apparent difficulties. Among early leavers, there is more variety in motivation for college attendance and withdrawal. The second difference lies in the timing of changes to systems of support for some of the students. While all of the non-entrants and at least two of the early leavers experienced significant economic exigencies before or by fall of 2007, the late leavers who do experience loss of support saw their financial and personal support systems change significantly at a later juncture in their college career. Table 5.5 summarizes the reasons late leavers give for withdrawal and their near-future plans.

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23 Late leavers are also more homogenous in terms of socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity. They are nearly all low income (Wayne, Jordan, Randall, Lana, Diane) or working class (Jarvis) and six out of seven are African American. Early leavers include middle income, working class, low income, African American, Latino and Asian youths.
### Table 5.5: Characteristics of three groups organized around persistence behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persistence pattern</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Reason for leaving</th>
<th>Near-future goals</th>
<th>Alternate path</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Non-entrants**    | 1. Joseph  
2. Michael  
3. Sonny  
4. Quin   | 1. Academic & financial  
2. Academic & financial  
3. Academic & financial  
4. Academic & financial | 1. Earn income  
2. Earn income  
3. Earn income & prepare for CAHSEE exam  
4. Earn income & train through armed services | 1. Workforce  
2. Workforce  
3. Workforce  
4. Armed services |
| **Early leavers**   | 1. Willow  
2. Jim  
3. Oscar  
4. Art  
5. Damond  
2. Incarceration  
3. Citizenship  
4. Personal interest  
5. Academics  
6. Adjustment to college & work/school balance | 1. Earn income & learn English  
2. N/A  
3. Earn income  
4. Travel  
5. Earn income  
6. Return to community college | 1. Workforce & adult school  
2. N/A  
3. Workforce  
4. To be determined  
5. Workforce  
6. N/A |
| **Late leavers**    | 1. Wayne  
2. Alaine  
3. Jordan  
4. Randall  
5. Lana  
6. Jarvis  
7. Diane | 1. Change in career plan  
2. Academics  
3. Financial  
4. Financial  
5. Financial  
6. College climate  
7. Academics | 1. Police training  
2. Short-term vocational study  
3. Earn income & move  
4. Earn income  
5. Earn income  
6. Take a break  
7. Short-term vocational study | 1. Police academy  
2. Private vocational college  
3. Workforce  
4. Workforce  
5. Workforce  
6. Different community college  
7. Cosmetology school |
From Table 5.5, it is not obvious that most late leavers’ decisions to leave encompass academics. When first asked why they had chosen to discontinue college enrollment, these students offered one explanation for withdrawal (listed in Table 5.5). Half of the group initially gave reasons that relate to change in career plans or focus on earning more money. However, as their narratives unfolded over the interview, details of the academic difficulties they did experience in community college emerged. Wayne is an example of a late leaver who offered a reason for leaving that does not appear initially to be related to academics. By the end of summer of 2008, he stated that college is no longer necessary given his new-found career interest:

Wayne: Yes I’m leaning towards leaving school and going into the force. I want to be, I would stay in school but now I’m seeing with the Oakland Police you don’t even need a degree, you just need a basic high school diploma. So it wouldn’t be necessary for me to stay in school...I’m not leaving school just to work a regular 9 to 5 job or a regular minimum wage job. I’m leaving school to join the academy and join the force.

He gives a very acceptable reason, above, for leaving: It is to join a respectable institution, to do work that contributes to his community. He added later: “I always wanted to do something to help out my community…It would be good to have [a degree] but I mean once you get in the force I know they have security in that job with the union and all that. So I don’t think I would need a degree to fall back on with the force.” While his decision to leave community college (and to put aside his former plan of getting a college education and degree) is explicitly linked to finding an attractive career that does not require a college education, rather than linked to experiencing academic difficulties in college, his account of his first year at community college and his course choices suggest that Wayne had become uncertain at some point about his ability to complete the AA degree he originally hoped to get to obtain employment as a counselor in juvenile hall.
In his second semester at community college, he repeated two courses that were easy to complete from the fall semester—African American Male-female Relationships and College Success. In the fall, he decided to withdraw from a remedial math course very early on (“That math class was hard!”) and later in the term dropped his only general education (GE) course, Psychology, a course that is directly related to his intended major. He reported dropping Psychology because it was too difficult (“I dropped the Psychology class because it was hard and I was like working”), and repeating the other two courses from the fall term because they were fun, more immediately relevant (“I took those classes because I liked them. I know the College Success class will keep me grounded at college and the African American Male-Females Relationship class was going to help me with relationships I’m building today”) and less demanding in terms of written products required. Yet, he stated his only reason for leaving college is a change in career plans. Though Wayne made it clear that discovering the police academy was key in his decision-making, he did not explain his academic course choices during his first year and the disappearance of his strong desire for a career that required postsecondary education.

Jordan, Randall, and Lana are similar to Wayne in the way they background their college academic experiences in their explanations for withdrawal. These three perhaps did so because their immediate situations are more complex, pushing them towards withdrawal sooner than they might otherwise have wanted. Jordan, who started his first semester by sampling two vocational

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24 It is unclear how he had gotten permission to repeat courses he had received credit for.
25 College Success is a course that helps new student understand the demands of college and develop the study skills and habits that will assist them in their college career. In Wayne’s case, he developed a close relationship with his instructor and it may be this relationship that led him to characterize College Success as a course that grounded him in college.
26 He also did not elaborate on the anxiety he felt in the classroom, which he referenced in his second interview.
27 Youth counseling was a career interest that he discussed during his senior year in high school and during the first two semesters in community college.
courses (auto body and dental assisting) before settling into a remedial English and an arithmetic course, framed his decision to stop out within the immediate family context:

Jordan: I hope to be like…in community college [next year]…[but] well this year I won’t – I just want to work so I can get establish my own place so then when I do go to school I won’t have any problems at all, so then I can just you know do me in college. And a better environment for me too so when I do go to college I’ll be more focused on college and I won’t have to worry about you know mom’s – her having to you know get some money or calling me to babysit or anything – none of that.

Above, Jordan explains that he feels compelled to take a year off to just work so that he can afford to move out of his mother’s place and find a space that will allow him to focus on study.

At his mother’s place, family members learned that Jordan and his twin were home more during daytime once they graduated from high school, and they would drop off their young children at Jordan’s home each morning, hoping someone would look after them. Jordan (unlike his twin brother) would feel obligated to watch the children. Looking after the children eventually led to withdrawal from his money management course (which met three times a week and had a strict attendance policy) that spring semester (spring 2008). By summer, he decided to take a break and find full time work that will earn him enough money to move away and live on his own, free of family obligations.

This explanation offers a coherent narrative to support his decision-making around college participation\(^\text{28}\). Yet, Jordan did not incorporate academics explicitly in his account of his decision-making despite his year-long difficulty with unchallenging remedial education and finding an area of study that would lead to a viable career. Like Wayne, in his second term at community college, Jordan only enrolled in courses that were of immediate relevance and enjoyment (money management and First Aid), not transfer-eligible ones. When family-related

\(^{28}\) Well, coherent to a certain point. He was unable to find work for many months, and was only able to obtain a seasonal part-time job during the summer. He did not make clear why he thinks his prospects would be better once he withdrew from community college.
difficulties arose later in the semester, he only kept the First Aid course which he had previously taken in high school and enjoyed. In all, Jordan completed three courses his first year—remedial English and remedial math in the fall and First Aid in the spring. Of the three, only two are academic courses, though these two courses (Arithmetic and Basic Writing) bear no college credit. His participation in the three courses appears to be a result of not knowing what he wants to study and not obtaining effective counseling (“My education goals now is to just well I’m tryin’ to get my general education out of the way ‘cause I still don’t know like what I really, really, really, really want to do”)\(^{29}\), possibly not understanding what “general education” is and how it fits within undergraduate study (“Like my career, you know, so it’s like I just want to get my general education – I’m just still like thinking about what I want to do so basically I just want to get the general ed out of the way and then I can just instantly go right into what I want to do”), and his disappointing experience with the math and English his counselor enrolled him in (“They enrolled me in some easy classes, English and math, kind of easy…it’s easier [than high school]”).

Randall and Lana also experienced academic disappointments in community college, but their reasoning around withdrawal focused more on the unstable living situations they found themselves in. Though Randall held a good amount of family stress prior to community college, once he turned eighteen, older family members expected him to carry his weight. Moving in with his older brother and sister-in-law to enroll in a community college district better than the one near his mother’s house, Randall tended his brother’s two very young children in exchange for room and board. In addition, he worked ten hours a week in a clothing store to earn extra income to pay his brother for expenses. Despite the job, he was unable to pay his brother the amount

\(^{29}\) He did investigate careers (specifically auto body and dental assisting) that he has heard of.
requested, and the following semester he was asked to move back into his mother’s house. Once there, he found another job (at Safeway), but this job would neither give him full time status nor predictable hours\textsuperscript{30}. Because he must work to pay for rent at his mother’s house, he stopped attending college. Similarly, when Lana found that she could no longer live with her brother (whom she stayed with rent free during the spring of 2008), she felt she needed to withdraw and work full time to pay for rent and living expenses. She had no other viable options to turn to. These two students found the financial aid at community college inadequate, and were unable to tap into state and federal grants\textsuperscript{31}.

Despite their explanations focused on finance\textsuperscript{32} as the key motivation for withdrawal, Randall and Lana’s academic experiences also appear to play an important role in their assessment of their college experience and prediction of potential outcomes for themselves. Randall’s first semester was rather optimistic in that he enrolled in four courses that were either pre-requisites or transferable—remedial English, Speech, Health Science, and Ethnic Studies. But losing housing at the end of first semester (fall 2007) and moving back to his mother’s contributed to his late enrollment in another community college district and led to his discovery that he could not transfer his units from one college to the other. Echoing Wayne and Jordan’s

\textsuperscript{30} The problem with contingent labor agreements is that students are forced to put school second to work schedules. If they want to keep their jobs, they must follow the unpredictable hours given to them. Traditional college classes, however, require regular in-person attendance. Impacted courses, in particular, have policies that keep poor attenders out from the start.

\textsuperscript{31} Students’ inability to tap into state and federal aid appears to be a result of poor financial aid infrastructure in many California public high schools and two-year colleges (Institute for College Access and Success, 2013). There is also evidence from interviews from this study that another source of the problem lie with some families. Parents or guardians in some cases do not cooperate with the financial aid application process by withholding their personal and tax information (perhaps due to the nature of economic conditions they live in). It was beyond the scope of this study to determine the intentions of the parents.

\textsuperscript{32} Students’ beliefs regarding college loans is another area for further study. Lana emphasized in her third interview that taking out loans is still not an option for her, given what relatives have told her about the risky nature of education loans. People find that they don’t reach their educational goals (which is common in her community) and cannot repay loans.
experiences, he reported enrolling in only one course during the spring, Ethnic Studies\textsuperscript{33}. What is familiar with this student’s story is that he only passed two classes in the fall semester, remedial English and Speech, and he decided to re-try a course he had withdrawn from in the fall—Ethnic Studies—in the spring. In total, Randall only received credit for two courses by the end of his first year (summer 2008). Yet, he did not explicitly incorporate academics into his reasoning about stopping out indefinitely from community college and working part-time indefinitely.

Lana differs from the boys in that she is explicit about the role academics played in her assessment of the likelihood she will complete an AA degree for nursing: “I think [my obstacles to obtaining my degree] would have to be work and financial demands and how much time I [have to] invest in my basic skills classes.” Lana explained later that she believes remedial education will help her get a stronger grounding for her nursing program, but it will also take much time. Each of these factors—work schedules, earning an income, and basic skills—stretches out the time spent on college study and contributes to the delay of degree attainment. In the spring of 2008\textsuperscript{34}, she enrolled in three courses—Arithmetic, Basic Writing, and Dynastic Learning\textsuperscript{35}—and of the three, she passed the latter two. She knows that remedial courses are “very easy, [for] some people they are,” but for her they are not. “You have to pay attention to what they’re teaching you and do all their work,” she says. Her disappointing experience in remedial math surprised her, and taught her that she might not be promoted through the levels as she had in high school.

\textsuperscript{33} He reported that he only enrolled in one course because many other courses had been closed by the time he registered.
\textsuperscript{34} She did not attend community college in the fall because her financial aid for tuition and books failed to materialize.
\textsuperscript{35} The student reported that Dynastic Learning is a course aimed to help students with learning disabilities like herself. She learned more about how her disability affected her learning in school and gained study and college course navigating skills (such as pre-viewing classes) that helped her become a more savvy college student.
The above four students demonstrate that community college requires substantial investment that is not obvious if one only considers tuition and the open access enrollment policy. This investment is riskier for low income minority youths who contend with multiple, synergistic risk factors over time. One or two reasons given for their withdrawal (as outlined in Table 5) inadequately capture the complexity of their circumstances. Lana, Randall, and Jordan’s situations show how lack of capacity for financial and other supports within families translates into insecure living environments. Supporting such immediate home contexts are the neighborhood and college contexts that leave students on their own: Jim, Jordan, Wayne and others repeatedly stated that they need to get away from high school friends and peers so that they can undertake community college. Lana and Randall have immediate relatives but they must take care of their material, academic, and psychic needs on their own. As Lana says in response to the question of why she is taking a break from college, “I’m like all by myself now.” Prior academic preparation, even if not explicitly given in students’ statements about departure, is usually part of the package of risks low income youths carry, particularly Black, Latino, and male youths.

Among the late leavers, three, Jarvis, Alaine and Diane, were able to give simpler accounts of their withdrawal decisions, since none contended with unstable home environments or immediate financial problems (as Jordan, Randall and Lana did). These students came to community college with the goal of completing general education requirements and transferring,

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36 Our understanding of their experience with friends as a source of distraction or risk becomes nuanced when we examine the role of friends as support networks among higher resourced students. In this study, students from Washington High (especially Asian Americans) talk consistently about the availability of friends who act as support for doing homework, study, and obtaining information about graduation requirements and college.

37 When student narratives about reaching for a better life through higher education (as documented in chapter three) is considered, motivations for obscuring the academic component of withdrawal can be better understood. Students at different moments express shame and self-blame over academic failures that are really outgrowths of low capacity urban schools and a hierarchical society.
but experienced college conditions that contributed to the disruption of their intent. Towards the end of his second (spring) semester, Jarvis decided to stop out after a frustrating course experience, while Alaine and Diane decided to withdraw altogether after recognizing that they were completely disinterested in general education, as they had experienced it. Jarvis recounts an experience with an instructor which led to his disengagement (i.e., stopping attendance and failing) from the class:

Jarvis: Math is also something I love but then this – the teacher like – the way he taught and the way he acted with the students. He kind of acted like a fool so… So I just left. [Each class] he [would] come a little bit late…I don’t know, I just didn’t like the teacher. It’s like he played around too much. I mostly look for the teachers that are like more like – they’re just like you know, they actually teach things how to do it and then make you do it and then if you need any help they’ll be there to help you. And he was like okay so this is how you do it, you guys are supposed to do it for homework and you guys are done. You guys have any questions come see me after class or you guys got my email, you can email me or whatever and [he would] just leave like 30 minutes before the time period ended.

Jarvis’ experience with a negligent instructor reminds us that faculty are powerful influences on student persistence. In this case, his perception of the quality of the college—via the standards/expectations his instructor held and the care he showed for students—had a big impact on the effort Jarvis put into college. His negative course experience seems less common within this group, however. Alaine’s story of academic disengagement, on the other hand, is more familiar.

Over the course of one year, Alaine completed classes that were easy for her to complete: in the fall, College Success, (first-year English) Composition 1B, and a writing workshop to support the Composition class; in the spring, Composition 1A and Algebra. She dropped Women’s History in the fall and Spanish in the spring, courses that were more demanding. By the end of the academic year, she felt there was no point to continue down the track she was on: “I felt like I took those classes in high school so what was the point?” Indeed, the bulk of her
classes in the first year were math and English; further, she learned that if she were to continue with her transfer track curriculum towards a business degree, she would have to take several semesters more of remedial math. Yet, academic courses that were challenging were also boring for her: “[College] was really slow, really boring. The classes I needed to transfer they…I couldn’t keep up in [them] because I was really uninterested in them.” At the end of the first academic year, with the assistance of her older sister, Alaine decided to enroll in a one-year medical assistant training program at a private technical college. It is less surprising that she would have a problem taking remedial courses in college, since she had already “passed” those courses in high school. What is less easy to understand is why both “easy” and “hard” classes were boring.

Diane also came to community college to complete course requirements for transfer, with the goal of working towards a fashion merchandising/design degree. She too found her classes uninteresting and soon started to perform poorly in class. Diane stopped attending sometime after the first semester of community college because she felt she was only being “refreshed” in her remedial math, remedial English and African-American Studies courses. When asked whether she learned from them, she replied:

No, not at all and that’s why I stopped going. I wasn’t even interested in like being there anymore…I don’t know—they just gave [the classes] to me. That’s why I think I wasn’t interested in them. I had went to the counselor and I didn’t know exactly what classes I wanted. All I knew is I wanted a design class. So I guess I had to take general ed classes instead like in order to get to the design class…They showed me all the classes that they had offered and that I would have to take in order to get to the design class. So I looked at all of them and I was like well…they just picked them out for me and I agreed to it and I ended up in the classes. And they were boring to me.

Above, she states that Arithmetic and English, as well as African-American Studies, were boring because she didn’t really choose them. Moreover, the courses seemed to her very much like classes she had taken in high school and did not seem to relate to the subject she was really
interested in (her intended major of design and merchandising). Diane’s statements are significant in that they highlight problems students commonly have: the lack of control over their studies and the compartmentalization of knowledge. It might be that Diane did not know how to negotiate the post-assessment counseling session nor understand the practice of designing one’s own college education plan; it may also be that her college expectations were violated when she discovered she had to take courses that are not directly related to her major in terms of disciplinary content. These skills—the ability to communicate with administrative agents (talk to an adult as an adult), to design an education plan, and to adapt to college expectations—are key components of college readiness, and having them might have averted what she felt were not genuinely productive semesters. But, while process-related knowledge is important in making the transition to college smoother, what is emphasized in Diane’s explanation of her withdrawal decision-making is boredom with courses.

The long-term boredom youths feel in school is likely an attitudinal outgrowth of several developments: the lack of control over their studies (or passive roles they take in school), the compartmentalization of knowledge or decontextualized learning\(^\text{38}\) (which can lead to slow student growth), and the impotence resulting from not obtaining the necessary tools (or academic preparedness, as well as social development congruent with the college context) to undertake significant academic projects. Interviews with Diane, Alaine and other participants show that when students sense that they cannot meet the academic requirements to successfully complete courses moving them towards their major (which would then lead them to think they cannot

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\(^{38}\) In contrast to decontextualized learning, linked learning is a movement at the secondary school level that counters compartmentalized learning through the assumption that project-based learning (wherein traditionally bounded subjects are integrated or organized around an end product) is more effective than learning that happens in very narrow contexts. Identity and self-determination are also addressed in linked learning in that students are given the opportunity to experiment with potential professional identities through the career pathways or academic choices they make for themselves. In this way, more room is made for investigative learning, self-directed learning, and learning for a larger, more personally meaningful goal.
undertake the larger postsecondary project), they begin planning for an alternate route. In Diane’s case, the point at which she decided to withdraw from the transfer-oriented track and move to a cosmetology program in community college indicates the important role academic experience plays in students’ decision-making around persistence. At the end of her first semester, she stated in her interview that her college goals have stayed the same because the semester experience was positive enough. This meant that in the fall, when she took remedial math (Arithmetic), remedial English (basic writing), and African American Studies, classes that were easy enough for her to complete, her goal was still focused on transfer to a four-year college. It was not until spring, when she attempted a design class (which directly relates to her intended major) that she decided to withdraw from all her courses. The design course material was too difficult for her, she reported. Similarly, Alaine withdrew from the transfer-oriented track after taking Algebra in the spring, realizing that it was very hard for her to keep up with the course material. To pursue a business degree would entail a long series of math (remediation, then Calculus), which she did not believe she wanted to undertake at that point. In an earlier section, another student, Damond, described the psychologically dislocating experience of his first college semester, when he immediately engaged with courses (math and Economics) that directly relate to his intended major (business) and confronted his weak academic standing in that area. The experience, he reported, motivated him to withdraw in order to assess his situation before deciding to return to community college. Students’ decisions to leave may have been nuanced with multiple considerations, but among late leavers (as well as an early leaver like Damond) it was academic preparedness and interest in the college classroom that were key motivators behind withdrawal from college.
In college, the curricular structure of transfer-track education adds another layer of challenge: before beginning specialization in a content area (i.e., major) one has to take prerequisites as-needed (for community college students, these are usually remedial math and/or English courses). Then there are the general education courses that add breadth to undergraduate education, but appear to many students as irrelevant to their major. Participants demonstrated that when they felt they had little control over curriculum—due to the large number of remediation/pre-requisites and breadth requirements—the time spent in college was experienced as less productive because they could not genuinely see why they were taking the courses they were taking. In other words the motivation for course-taking is extrinsic, not intrinsic. Students, such as Alaine and Diane, emphasized that they felt their general education courses were repetitions of what they had experienced in high school. What they are saying is that they perceived most of their college courses as irrelevant. Many of the participants in this study went into post-assessment advising (where initial course enrollment usually occurs) without sufficient college knowledge to ask the right questions; they ended up in classes their first year that were truly repetitions of courses from high school or earlier (college remedial courses are meant to drill into students what colleges call “basic” skills) and courses that did not directly build content knowledge in the area of an intended major (in Diane’s case, such a course would be African American Studies, a course that would count as a general education transferable course but not a major-specific course). In regards to the first type of class, skill-building prerequisite courses are problematic in their assumption that academic proficiency is best obtained in a sequenced curriculum that starts with and focuses on compartmentalized low-level learning (Grubb, 2013). The second type of class is not problematic in and of itself, but the common counseling practice (found in this study) of enrolling students in courses just to meet requirements is problematic in
that students are not guided in learning how to think about the process of exploring areas of study to reach a specialization. Thus, the core of the complex problem that Diane articulated earlier may be the basic curricular structure of transfer-track education, how learning in a content area (e.g., college major) is organized, and the time investment or resources needed to wade through pre-requisites and breadth requirements.

It was argued earlier that late leavers were, as a group, more homogeneous compared to early leavers. Because late leavers stayed in the college system longer, academic experiences in the first year appear to have played a key role in their decisions to withdraw. It is also important to note that other challenges to persistence (which were often financial) for late leavers became more apparent at a later juncture in their postsecondary pathway, compared to some early leavers. Thus, whether these students were classified as early or late leavers is to a degree related to when changes in their support systems occurred. Table 5.6 summarizes leavers’ reasons for leaving, the enabling resources in their lives, and resources they needed to progress in college.

Table 5.6: Early and late leavers’ expressed reasons for leaving and their reported resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early leavers</th>
<th>Reason for leaving</th>
<th>Enabling Resources</th>
<th>Resources needed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
                    |                    |                    | b. Family support  
                    |                    |                    | c. English skills |
                    |                    |                    | b. Positive peer influence  
                    |                    |                    | 40 |
                    |                    |                    | b. Financial support  
                    |                    |                    | c. Course taking acumen |
                    |                    |                    | b. Study habits/skill set  
                    |                    |                    | c. Stress management/ |

39 Jim spoke of earning a C average in high school, but since he did not participate in a college interview, his college academic experience could not be assessed here.

40 Positive peer influence is a code to convey students’ reports of their peers as a negative influence on their behavior, in that in the company of these friends they will engage in behavior that undermine their college success.
### Late leavers | Reason for leaving | Enabling Resources | Resources needed
--- | --- | --- | ---
b. Motivation for college study  
c. Financial support  
d. Community college expectations
b. Motivation for college study
b. Family support  
c. Financial support  
d. Community college expectations
b. Family support  
c. Financial support  
d. Study habits/skill set
b. Financial support  
c. Family support  
d. Community college expectations
b. Course taking acumen  
c. Academic support  
d. Community college expectations
b. Course taking acumen  
c. Social supports in CC  
d. Community college expectations

\(^{41}\) **Parental expectations** is a code that encompasses a parent or guardian’s hopes, desires, and expectations for a certain conduct and achievement in school and their encouragement and support of such behavior.

\(^{42}\) Note that the boundary between these two categories is to a degree arbitrary in another way. Those who leave between the spring and fall of 2008 are classified as late leavers, even if they have only completed one term. Lana is the only participant among late leavers who started late and completed one semester by the time the last interview in the fall of 2008 took place.
From Table 5.6, several patterns can be discerned. First, while early leavers had a variety of reasons for withdrawing, late leavers tended to leave because they did not have sufficient financial and academic support, and some made concrete plans for changing their career paths as a result. Second, academic preparation was the most common resource needed among late leavers. Only Jarvis is coded as needing academic support, a code that indicates less severity. The other six students are coded as needing academic preparation because they indicated dislike of at least some of their academic courses and they were placed by their colleges into low level math courses (arithmetic or elementary algebra). These same students were also placed into remedial English, with the exception of Alaine (who only placed in remedial math, not remedial English). Three of the late leavers explicitly reported withdrawing for academic-related reasons while another three reported leaving because of the sudden loss of their support system, though they too experienced academic difficulties. Only Jarvis returned after a brief stop-out.

It might have been the case that had some late leavers received adequate financial support, they would have persisted in the community college system. Randall, Jordan, and Lana all reported that they intended to return to college when their immediate living situation improved. Yet, it is questionable how far they would have progressed in community college without more academic, informational and social supports. To better understand the conditions leavers faced in their college-decision-making, the next section looks at participants who did not report withdrawing during the study and their responses to conditions within community college.

**Persisters**
The category “persister” refers to students who persist in college continuously upon initial enrollment\(^{43}\). Compared to early leavers (who are a varied group in terms of their motivations for leaving) and late leavers (who are a more homogenous group in terms of the challenges they faced in community college and their motivations for leaving), persisters are a somewhat mixed group in regards to the problem-solving strategies they took in response to the college conditions they experienced. However, they are similar to one another in that they had in place personal infrastructure which enabled uninterrupted persistence in college. Table 5.7 shows that, compared to late leavers, fewer persisters reported needing remediation and they were more likely to perceive parental expectations.

**Table 5.7**: Factors that underlie persisters’ ability to persist in community college

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persister</th>
<th>Enabling Resources</th>
<th>Resources needed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Tim    | a. Grandmother (acting parent and positive role model) & Dad (negative role model)  
b. Desire social status | a. Financial support  
b. Positive peer influence  
c. Academic preparation  
d. Community college expectations  
e. Motivation for college study |
| 2. Kam    | a. Parental expectations | a. Social & peer support  
b. Course taking acumen  
c. Community college expectations  
d. More effective remedial education |
b. Course taking acumen  
c. Study habits/skill set  
d. Academic preparation  
e. Social & peer support |
b. Path to citizenship  
c. Financial support |
| 5. Gilbert| a. Parental expectations | a. Motivation for college study |
b. Social & peer support  
c. More robust counseling in community college |

\(^{43}\) Of the sixteen youths placed in this category, only fifteen are examined in this section. Connie, who reported doing enrollment paperwork in August of 2008, did not participate in another interview, and so her experiences could not be documented. Tim and Emme also delayed enrollment after graduating high school, but they participated in interviews after completing one term, allowing the researcher to include their voices.
Table 5.7 shows persisters’ comparative academic preparation. Of the fifteen students, only three (Tim, Ray, and Taeshe) discussed struggling to complete academic assignments or failing a course because it was too difficult. Four others (Emme, Erin, Ken, and Lisa) reported needing academic assistance with certain courses but not failing projects or courses due to academic difficulty. While more than seven of the persisters were placed in either remedial math or English, only these seven discussed needing academic support to do better in their classes. Kam and Tavis, who were also tested into remediation, did not report difficulty but rather boredom because their remedial classes were too easy for them. Thus, three out of fifteen (or, twenty percent) persisters reported significant trouble with academic assignments or failing a course, compared with six out of seven (or, eighty-six percent of) late leavers who reported such academic difficulties. If the additional four out of fifteen (or, twenty-seven percent) who reported needing academic tutoring were included in the number of academically less prepared students (totaling 47% of sub-group), persisters would still compare well against late leavers—all of whom indicated in some manner significant academic difficulty or needing academic support.
Another enabler for college persistence is the presence of parents. Compared to other participants characterized in Table 5.6, persisters indicated they were more conscious of their parent’s expectations. In other words, participants in this group cited their parent or guardian’s expectations, encouragement, and supportive actions in more than one interview as a key enabler for their continued progress in college. Taeshe, for example, said that her father would not allow her to continue living in his house if she stopped attending college. Gilbert and Charles reported during high school that their mothers expected them to do well in school so that they could brag to their friends, and their influence continued into college. Parental expectations is a code that also encompasses concrete actions that encourage persistence in school. Emme reported that she would turn to her mother for assistance when she struggled with homework during her first year at community college. Erin repeated across her interviews the pride that her parents exhibited in seeing her and her brother in college. May described her parents as a good sounding board when she needed to talk through her college decision-making. John characterized his parents’ support in terms of a vision that they provide (i.e., education is one of their goals as immigrants) as well as their encouragement for him to talk about his schooling experiences. For these community college students, nearly all of whom continued to live at home, parental expectations appear to make a difference in how students perceive the act of college enrollment and persistence and the concrete supports they received during the process.

Moreover, persisters did not experience any loss of support systems during the study, with the exception of Tavis. In other words, fourteen of the fifteen students experienced stable, and generally supportive, home/living environments throughout the eighteen months. Only Tavis experienced by the summer of 2008 an urgent need to obtain a more than half-time job that would help him assist with his family’s financial needs (a situation that motivated him eventually
to change his full-time attendance status to part-time attendance). The role of personal infrastructure is quite important to student persistence. Among early and late leavers, the ones who experienced changes in their support systems in college reported that they would have persisted further had their life circumstances not changed. Table 5.8 maps out students’ college participation behavior against their systems of support, intensity of enrollment, estimated academic progress and expressed confidence that they will reach their educational goals.

Table 5.8: Comparing sub-groups’ support systems and estimated academic progress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation behavior</th>
<th>Support system</th>
<th>Intensity of enrollment</th>
<th>Estimated academic progress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early leavers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Willow</td>
<td>Yes, fall 2007</td>
<td>Full-time, one semester</td>
<td>12 units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Jim</td>
<td>Missing data</td>
<td>Missing data</td>
<td>Missing data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Oscar</td>
<td>Yes, fall 2007</td>
<td>Part-time, one semester</td>
<td>6 units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Art</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Part-time, one semester</td>
<td>9 units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Damond</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Part-time, one semester</td>
<td>6 units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Kylie</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Full-time initially, but withdraw from all courses in fall and fall to part-time in spring</td>
<td>6 units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late leavers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

44 The number of units reported here are approximations given by the student. Students generally remember which classes they took and received credit for; however, they often don’t remember the exact units. For example, a math class might be given 5 units while another general education class might only be given 3 or 4 units. Thus, students have a hard time remembering the exact number of units they have earned.
| 1. Wayne  | No   | Part-time, both semesters | 6 units |
| 2. Alaine | No   | Full-time first semester, part-time second | 12 units |
| 3. Jordan | Yes, spring 2008 | Part-time, both semesters | 11 units |
| 4. Randall | Yes, spring 2008 | Full-time first semester, part-time second | 8 units |
| 5. Lana | Yes, summer 2008 | Full-time, one semester | 8 units |
| 6. Jarvis | No   | Full-time first semester, part-time second | 20 units |
| 7. Diane | No   | Full-time, one semester | 9 units |

**Persisters**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change in support system? If so, when?</th>
<th>Enroll full-time or part-time?</th>
<th>Number of community college units accrued by Fall 2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Tim</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Part-time, one semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Kam</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Full-time, consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ray</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Part-time, consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. John</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Part-time, consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Gilbert</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Full-time, consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Charles</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Full-time, consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. May</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Full-time, consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Ella</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Full-time, consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Emme</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Full-time, one semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Taeshe</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Full-time, consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Erin</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Full-time, consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Ken</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Full-time, consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Xia</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Full-time, consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Tavis</td>
<td>Yes, summer 2008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 5.8, three additional patterns emerge. First about half of all the leavers experienced significant loss of support outside of college sometime during the first year of college enrollment. Second, with the exception of Willow and Jarvis, leavers accrued relatively few academic units during their time in college (their enrollment pattern was the low intensity kind). Third, there was a higher proportion of persisters who accrued a relatively large number of academic units (through high intensity enrollment). Gilbert, Charles and May, especially, gained a large number of college credits as a result of high intensity enrollment combined with summer school and AP credits. The exceptions among persisters are Tim and Emme who delayed enrollment and only completed one term by their last interview. Ray, John and Lisa are also exceptions because they earned credits slowly due to their part-time enrollment. As a whole, however, the majority (ten out of fifteen) of persisters reported towards the end of this study that they were consistently enrolling full-time each semester. In general, it appears that the combination of stable support systems outside of college and relative academic preparation enabled persisters in building momentum in their college progress (engage in high intensity enrollment).

But persisters did not have it easy. Like leavers, they, too, experienced challenges once in community college. Table 7 shows that the leading challenges for persisters are obtaining information (eight students cited this), academic support (seven cited this), social/peer support  

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Ray reported that he chose to enroll part-time because he found his courses overwhelming at times. John enrolled part-time so that he could put more hours into his family’s business. And Lisa only enrolled in two to three ESL classes per semester due to her limited language skills.
(five cited this), and financial support (five cited this). Social and peers support is a code that refers to students’ need for information, academic support, and moral support—delivered through social relationships within their respective college. It, therefore, should be interpreted as overlapping to some degree with the codes information and academics\textsuperscript{46}.

If persisters are examined in terms of how they responded to the challenges they encountered in community college, we find that their actions are not necessarily more sensible than leavers’ responses to challenges. In a few cases, such as with Kam, Ray and Lisa, persisters approached their challenges in ways that do not mitigate their perceived stressors at all. However, because many of the persisters did not face more fundamental challenges, such as financing a place to live and entering college with significant academic deficits, they were more likely to stay with their intent of college completion and to address the challenges of the community college setting. Each student dealt with their perceived challenges in varied ways, targeting the college-specific issue in a manner fit with their disposition and skill sets. Though the particularities of each participant’s situation are distinct, persisters on the whole addressed the challenges of community college by engaging in help-seeking behavior to support their informational, and to a lesser degree, academic needs; by using old friends, new friends, institutional agents and/or online organizations (e.g., Assist.com) as social and informational supports; and by focusing their course-taking early on in areas of genuine interest (not just fulfilling requirements or “getting GE requirements out of the way”). In contrast, more than half

\textsuperscript{46} Data from this study suggest that peer relationships in community college are perceived differently than those developed on residential four-year campuses. Community college students approach college relationships in a utilitarian way, framing those relationships in the context of getting tasks completed. For example, friendships formed in class were discussed by participants in this study as those that arose organically, often in response to assignments or projects. Peer relationships offer unique academic and social supports in this scenario because the sort of academic assistance and moral support given by peers are not offered from other sources such as faculty and counselors. But peer relationships are often not expansive or long lasting in community college. This may be a result of 1) the commuter environment where students only come to campus to attend class and there are no social centers equivalent to the residential four-year environment and 2) less need for new friendships since prior friendships are in place among students who have not moved.
of the late leavers begin to engage less with academic courses by their second term, and engage less in help-seeking behavior for their academic needs. Below Tables 5.9 and 5.10 map early leavers, late leavers and persisters’ responses to perceived obstacles in community college. Note that the obstacles are not necessarily listed in order of importance.

Table 9: Early and late leavers’ responses to perceived obstacles in community college

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early leavers</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (out-of-college)</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (in-college)</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Lack of economic opportunities</td>
<td></td>
<td>b. Use informal network for job assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>c. Use no-cost adult school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Lack of economic opportunities</td>
<td></td>
<td>b. Missing data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Oscar</td>
<td>a. No pathway to citizenship</td>
<td>a. Lack of financial aid</td>
<td>a. Experiment with CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Lack of economic opportunities</td>
<td>b. Ineffective counseling</td>
<td>b. Consult with counselors/staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>c. Withdraw from CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>d. Use informal network for job assistance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early leavers</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (out-of-college)</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (in-college)</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The code “lack of economic opportunities” is intended to convey the extremely limited job opportunities for undocumented and other low income youths in this sample. It is not impossible to find work; but participants report the work they find is usually minimum wage and contingent. For example, Willow worked as an on-call janitor for a couple months before she landed a steady job at a bakery. Oscar moved from part-time job to part-time job frequently over a period of a year due to his lack of documentation. Wayne found work as a janitor for a local school his first year at community college. Lana did minimum wage seasonal work at a clothing store. Others like Jordan, Kam and Tim reported being unsuccessful at finding work during the regular school terms, and only found part time work with refuse and recycling services during the summer.
5. Damond

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Late leavers</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (out-of-college)</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (in-college)</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Wayne</td>
<td>a. Lack of economic opportunities</td>
<td>a. Difficulty of GE &amp; major-specific courses</td>
<td>a. Enroll in “easy” courses first term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Difficulty of remedial math</td>
<td>b. Difficulty of remedial math</td>
<td>b. Stay with same easy courses throughout year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>c. Enroll only in courses of immediate practical use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>d. Explore alternative career pathways using personal channels</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Kylie

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Late leavers</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (out-of-college)</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (in-college)</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Alaine</td>
<td>a. Ability to adjust to transitions</td>
<td>a. Difficulty of major-specific courses</td>
<td>a. Enroll in “easy” courses first term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b. Withdraw from CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>c. Enroll in medical assistant program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Jordan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Late leavers</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (out-of-college)</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (in-college)</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Late leavers</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (out-of-college)</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (in-college)</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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48 The code “job” should be interpreted here as paid employment, not a career a student aspires to.

49 Students report that part-time work may not conflict with school in terms of total number of hours spent working per week, but rather in terms of unpredictable hours given and/or inflexible scheduling (that only meets the needs of the employer, not the student).

50 All students enroll in courses that they perceive as meeting practical use. But what “practical use” means differs for different students. Some students experience enrollment and achievement in transferable courses as practical. Others experience experimentation with various academic courses/disciplines as practical. And still others, like Wayne, experience non-transferable, non-academic courses as practical. The coding in this chapter (“enroll in courses of practical use”) is only used to highlight course choice-making that directly conflicts with a student’s reported college degree goals.

51 The personal channels Wayne reported using are friends, peers, and TV commercials.
1. Jordan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a. Lack of family support</th>
<th>b. Housing instability</th>
<th>c. Lack of economic opportunities</th>
<th>d. Inflexibility of work schedule</th>
<th>e. College knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Difficulty of GE courses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Find and stick with part-time job</td>
<td>b. Explore career pathways using varied channels</td>
<td>c. Explore private vocational college</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Erika

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a. Lack of family support</th>
<th>b. Housing instability</th>
<th>c. Lack of economic opportunities</th>
<th>d. College knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Difficulty of remedial courses (English &amp; math)</td>
<td>b. Teaching methods</td>
<td>c. Tuition and material costs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Get feedback for assignments from faculty &amp; CC peers</td>
<td>b. Search for job</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Jim

|-------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|

4. Randall

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a. Lack of family support</th>
<th>b. Housing instability</th>
<th>c. Lack of economic opportunities</th>
<th>d. Inflexibility of work schedule</th>
<th>e. College knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Difficulty of GE courses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Find and stick with part-time job</td>
<td>b. Explore career pathways using varied channels</td>
<td>c. Explore private vocational college</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Lana

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a. Lack of family support</th>
<th>b. Housing instability</th>
<th>c. Lack of economic opportunities</th>
<th>d. College knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Difficulty of remedial courses (English &amp; math)</td>
<td>b. Teaching methods</td>
<td>c. Tuition and material costs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Get feedback for assignments from faculty &amp; CC peers</td>
<td>b. Search for job</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Jarvis

|-------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|

7. Diane

|-------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|

---

52 In other words, the student has not yet found a guiding focus for study, whether it be vocational or intellectual in nature.

53 Jordan hears about potential careers from family and friends and experimented with courses (such as dental assisting and auto mechanics) he heard of through these channels of information.

54 “Explore career pathways through varied channels” is a code that encompasses more immediate personal sources—such as family, friends, neighborhood peers, and the media (TV, radio, internet, technology applications)—and less immediate (or, more distant) sources such referrals from school agents. Randall followed up with adults he met through school youth programs focused on developing youth leadership skills. These relationships at City Hall and the local university law program, however, did not bring about any concrete opportunities for him.
Early and late leavers’ responses to their perceived obstacles make sense in that students took action to minimize their stressors. For instance, Oscar (an early leaver) felt deeply the stress of being undocumented. He explored his future by looking at the options available at community college briefly, before diving into various jobs that he perceived would help him, at the very least, earn money right away. His time at community college, with ineffective counselors, did not convince him that obtaining a degree will help him find a white-collar/professional job after graduation. Alaine and Wayne (late leavers) tried to minimize their feelings of stress in academic contexts by enrolling in “easy” courses their first semester so that they will have time to acclimate. Similarly, Jarvis decreased the stress he felt from being alone and unconnected in community college by first withdrawing, then connecting with peers from another college who facilitated his enrollment in the Puente learning community at another community college. But, leavers’ response to college stressors (with some exceptions among the varied group of early leavers) was to withdraw from the stressors, not address them. Among late leaver, specifically, only Jarvis re-engaged (re-enrolled) and addressed his issues through Puente. The other late leavers—Wayne, Alaine, Jordan, Randall, Lana, and Diane—engaged less with academics by their second semester, as did Damond (an early leaver) who decided not to enroll a second term due to academics. Among the seven who contended with academic troubles (either in the form of boring and difficult remedial education or inaccessible major-specific transferable courses), none sought feedback within their college when they made their decision to withdraw. Only Lana and Damond spoke to their instructors about their assignments or exams towards the latter half of their single term in community college.

Many of the persisters were able to improve their circumstances in community college by developing college relationships to support informational and social needs and actively seeking
help at critical junctures. It is likely that they were able to overcome challenges mainly through the channel of social and informational/advising support because many of them did not contend with significant academic deficits and unstable home environments. Ray and Lisa enrolled part-time due to their academic troubles and language barriers (respectively), but their stable home and financial circumstances appear to have facilitated their persistence. Taeshe, too, reported having a great deal of trouble in her remedial math classes, but she was able to access the academic content of courses that were of interest to her. (In other words, the courses she did better in fall within areas she wanted to major in.) Table 5.10 outlines persisters’ responses to challenges. The responses of the persisters varied in accordance to the challenges they perceived at their college and their skill set and disposition.

### Table 5.10: Persisters’ responses to perceived obstacles in community college

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persisters</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (out-of-college)</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (in-college)</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Limited family support</td>
<td>b. Difficulty of GE courses</td>
<td>b. Enroll part-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>c. Tuition and material costs</td>
<td>c. Obtain assistance from classmates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>d. Use informal network for job assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Family obligations</td>
<td>b. Not yet found major</td>
<td>b. Does not expand CC friendship network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Loss of peer support</td>
<td>c. Social isolation</td>
<td>d. Does not get feedback from academic counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>c. Enroll full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>d. Persist in courses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

55 Ray did however withdraw from his community college after the third interview (where this study was bounded) with plans to move to another state where he had a few friends and start again at a different community college, with the hopes of improving his chances of academic success.

56 In this table, this group includes only fifteen students, as opposed to sixteen. Though Connie reported enrolling in community college for the first time in fall of 2008, because of the timing of the last interview with her, her enrollment and completion could not be verified. Thus, she is not included here as a “persister.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persisters</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (out-of-college)</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (in-college)</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Motivation to keep up with school work</td>
<td>b. Under-resourced counseling center</td>
<td>b. Did not obtain books for courses when financial aid did not materialize fall 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. College knowledge</td>
<td>c. Logic of community college practices not transparent</td>
<td>c. Enroll part-time consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Temporary financial hardship in fall 2007</td>
<td>d. Relationship with CC faculty</td>
<td>d. Persist in courses with limited engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. Lack of peer support</td>
<td>e. Teaching methods</td>
<td>e. Does not get feedback from faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>f. Stress over course assignments</td>
<td>f. Does not get tutoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>g. Not yet found major</td>
<td>g. Procrastinate with school projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>h. Financial aid did not go through fall 2007</td>
<td>h. Expand exploration of career pathways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>i. Change college and living location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. John</td>
<td>a. Not having a social security number when enrolling in CC</td>
<td>a. Amount of time needed to complete CC and transfer</td>
<td>a. Rely on high school counselor for help enrolling in CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Social distractions &amp; procrastination</td>
<td>b. Rely mostly on himself to obtain college information</td>
<td>b. Rely mostly on himself to obtain college information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Avoidance of citizenship (documentation) Problem</td>
<td>c. Work more hours</td>
<td>c. Work more hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Family obligations</td>
<td>d. Enroll part-time consistently</td>
<td>d. Enroll part-time consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>e. Focus narrowly on each semester rather than looking ahead to long term degree goal</td>
<td>e. Focus narrowly on each semester rather than looking ahead to long term degree goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Gilbert</td>
<td>a. Cultural values in regards to appropriate college major</td>
<td>a. Did not notice due to lack of engagement</td>
<td>a. Disengage from CC community (faculty and classmates)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Lack of interest in life sciences (his major)</td>
<td>b. Rely on personal network (friends &amp; older brother) and online network for college information</td>
<td>b. Rely on personal network (friends &amp; older brother) and online network for college information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>c. Focus on finding ways to obtain good grades for least amount of effort</td>
<td>c. Focus on finding ways to obtain good grades for least amount of effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persisters</td>
<td>Perceived obstacle (out-of-college)</td>
<td>Perceived obstacle (in-college)</td>
<td>Response</td>
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<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Social isolation</td>
<td>b. Social isolation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Ineffective counseling</td>
<td>c. Ineffective counseling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Non-standardized university transfer requirements</td>
<td>d. Non-standardized university transfer requirements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Use social networks to find good teachers</td>
<td>a. Use social networks to find good teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Rely on girlfriend &amp; old friends for social support</td>
<td>b. Rely on girlfriend &amp; old friends for social support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Use outside organization (Assist.com) for transfer guidance</td>
<td>c. Use outside organization (Assist.com) for transfer guidance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Enroll full-time consistently</td>
<td>d. Enroll full-time consistently</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. May</td>
<td>a. Family responsibility</td>
<td>a. Not yet found major</td>
<td>a. Enroll more than full-time first year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Not allowed to take upper division courses while in CC</td>
<td>b. Not allowed to take upper division courses while in CC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Under-resourced counseling center</td>
<td>c. Under-resourced counseling center</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Difficulty with Biology course</td>
<td>d. Difficulty with Biology course</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Enroll more than full-time first year</td>
<td>a. Enroll more than full-time first year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Investigate all options at counseling office</td>
<td>b. Investigate all options at counseling office</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Enroll in concurrent enrollment program</td>
<td>c. Enroll in concurrent enrollment program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Follow up with faculty regularly</td>
<td>d. Follow up with faculty regularly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. Network for career-building internships through Jewish community</td>
<td>e. Network for career-building internships through Jewish community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f. Develop friendship network in CC</td>
<td>f. Develop friendship network in CC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>g. Focus on transfer to most prestigious 4-year college</td>
<td>g. Focus on transfer to most prestigious 4-year college</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

57 This code differs from “lack of economic opportunities” in two ways. While youths who are tagged with either the codes “limited financial support” or “lack of economic opportunities” perceive that their financial circumstance is a key obstacle in their pursuit of a college degree, the latter group report experiencing greater financial constraints due to 1) limited or lack of family support and 2) great difficulty finding a job for themselves that isn’t seasonal, unstable or associated with very negative work conditions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persisters</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (out-of-college)</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (in-college)</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
b. Enroll full-time consistently  
c. Focus course-taking on major & breadth requirements (for transfer)  
d. Withdraw from one breadth course- music  
e. Achieve highest in all courses related to major (Criminology)  
f. Enroll in Aspire (program to assist with English skills, academic support & transfer to 4-year)  
g. Rely on CC counselor  
g. Rely on mom for support, including homework help |
| 10. Taeshe | a. Limited financial support  
b. Number of hours put into job  
c. Time required to commute to college  
d. Shyness (inability to reach out to people for help and advice) | a. Placement into remediation (math & English)  
b. Difficulty of remedial math  
c. Community college expectations | a. Challenge assessment test  
b. Enroll full-time consistently  
c. Does not develop CC friendship network; instead take classes with boyfriend  
e. Rely on family and boyfriend's sister for course-taking and career advice  
f. Focus on transfer to 4-year college |
b. Distractions due to too many friends at first college  
c. Discovery of unappealing aspects of intended major (nursing) | a. Financial aid did not materialize fall 2007  
b. Difficulty of transfer-level English course | a. Rely on older brother for temporary financial assistance  
b. Withdraw from transfer-level English & tried Sociology  
c. Change major from Nursing to Sociology  
d. Perceives remedial |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persisters</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (out-of-college)</th>
<th>Perceived obstacle (in-college)</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12. Ken</td>
<td>a. Limited economic and internship opportunities</td>
<td>a. Under-resourced counseling center b. Developing college education plan c. Difference between teaching practices in high school and college (more timed testing/writing in CC) d. Difficulty with transfer-level English e. Low motivation level of CC classmates</td>
<td>a. Enroll full-time consistently b. Rely on classmates with similar work habits in class c. Does not develop CC social network d. Rely on old friends for information about courses e. Rely on CC counselor for transfer information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Xia</td>
<td>a. Lack of college knowledge (in American context) at start of college</td>
<td>a. Ineffective counseling b. Unreliability of information sources in CC</td>
<td>a. Enroll full-time consistently b. Focus on transfer to most prestigious 4-year college c. Develop relationships with faculty d. Obtain campus jobs (as math tutor and lab aid) and other work (translator at hospital) for money and career exploration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 15. Tavis | a. Limited financial support  
b. Family obligations  
c. Number of hours put into job | a. Placement in remediation (math & English)  
b. Unchallenging remedial math  
c. Dislike breadth course (Art history)  
d. Too much busy work that does not truly increase learning  
e. Low motivation level of CC classmates  
f. Under-resourced counseling center | a. Negotiate with counselor to bypass remedial English at start of CC  
b. Communicate with counselor when classes are too easy  
c. Re-take assessment test for math  
d. Rely on friends for support & information  
e. Rely on counselors & faculty for advice (beyond classroom)  
f. Focus on transfer to 4-year college  
g. Enroll consistently, but after first year enroll part-time due to change in financial situation of family |

Persisters range in their ability to address common challenges posed by the community college environment. As documented in chapter five, the assessment/remediation placement process, education planning, and counseling can be significant stumbling blocks for students. And as students spend more time in college, quality advising and informational support continues to be critical for student persistence, though often such support is very hard to come by. Xia and Tavis are two students who tested into remediation and used different strategies to address their perceived problems with assessment. Xia, a student from China who spent only a short time during her high school senior year in the U.S., scored slightly below the cut-off for
college-credit English. After examining her reading and writing scores, she determined that her weak point was her vocabulary, not her analytical ability. She subsequently ignored the counselor’s advice to enroll in the remedial class one step below college-credit English and focused her course-taking that first semester on math, science, and general education—all transferable courses and all which directly supported her interest in a science career. She reasoned that would give her enough time and practice with English to go right into college-level English the following term. Her decision was supported by her strong confidence in her academic preparation and ability, as well as her investigation of the actual requirements of transferable courses and enrollment processes at her college. She faced the problem of poor information support at community college like other students, but persisted in talking to peers, rather than the counselors, and eventually developed good relationships with faculty members to obtain more informational and support options. Tavis was another student who was placed in remediation. He too was skeptical and his scores. Tavis took a different approach from Xia, but one that worked for him. He examined his English scores carefully and spoke to the counselor at length, pointing to his borderline score and convincing her that he could take the next level course (college-credit English). The counselor who he saw after taking the assessment exam enrolled him in the English course he requested, but urged him to take remedial math since his score in that area was not borderline. Tavis joined the recommended math class and half-way through the semester, came back to his counselor to discuss its poor fit with his ability. He eventually re-took the assessment test to test into a higher level math. Both of these students demonstrated a confidence in their ability to handle higher-level work in college and challenged college processes that they perceived to be inappropriate for their needs and goals.
The desire to make connections between courses and potential career interests or exploration is a need that all student participants reported having. Finding that connection, however, was often a challenge, even for the most academically prepared. May, one of the two most academically prepared students in this study, is a good illustration of how quality advising can support able students to progress efficiently. An area that has not been explored is the potential for faculty to be a source of guidance for college students, to provide stepping stones that bridge an intellectual area with potential professional careers.

May describes how she finally came to an understanding that Middle Eastern Studies and Journalism are appropriate specializations for her:

May: One of my teacher’s was actually kind of a mentor for me here. She’s helped me out with a lot of things and she’s just – she’s talked to me about a lot of different aspects of life and she’s very knowledgeable. I’m going to be doing independent studies with her this semester… Yeah, she actually had – she had a funny role because right when I was figuring out that maybe marine biology wasn’t exactly what I wanted to do I was talking to her about it and trying to figure it out ‘cause she was – she asked me what I wanted I was taking, what my load was and I told her chemistry and bio and all of these other things and she’s like why are you taking so many units and then I explained I have to finish before I transferred. And she was like well I don’t understand why you’re going into marine biology; it seems like such a waste. And it was really funny because I asked her what she meant. She was like well you’re an amazing writer I don’t – you know you’re going to go and sit in lab for the rest of your life and disappear under all of these books and files and things and – I realized after that, it was something, it was a process that was going through my mind as well that maybe marine biology wasn’t exactly what I wanted to do. And she said that and it was just something that really made me think. And I kept thinking about it and I was like yeah you know I don’t think I’m going to do marine biology anymore. I think I’d rather go into something that has to do more with writing. And it’s something that so many people were telling me but she happened to be there at the right time and with the right approach that it just had to take effect on me… Um – she was just always open to meet. You know, if I needed to talk about something she was there to talk about it. If I needed help she was there to help. Um – we went out for lunch once or twice just to talk, figure things out. She was always available and she was very – she would voice her opinions and that was really nice because she would give you what she saw and what she was thinking instead of sort of hiding it under vagaries or trying not to influence you, you know, because she wanted you to find your own thing. She would express what she was thinking and you were free to take it or leave it and
The above faculty member played an important role in May’s process of finding a college major. Because the instructor paid attention to her interests and areas of strength, and took the time to talk to her about her education plans beyond what was happening in the classroom, a mentoring relationship developed, with significant consequences. The fact that the faculty member specialized in the area that May became interested in, and her delivery of advice was of good quality, are key. On the other side of the equation was May’s ability to develop rapport with instructors. When asked how she developed relationships with faculty in general, May responds, “I’ve always been comfortable talking to teachers ever since I was younger. Um – I’m comfortable speaking with people in general even if they’re older than me. I feel like I’m mature and I’ve been raised to be able to hold conversation with people even if they’re 40 years older than me and I’m not daunted by speaking to someone who has more knowledge than I do.” Her comfort with adults—especially teachers—appears to have played an important role in the development of mentoring relationships so key to her academic trajectory. This easy rapport May has with teachers is not evident in interviews with most of the other participants in this study.

**Making Sense of Students’ Help-seeking Behavior**

The prior sections describe the relational patterns found among early leavers, late leavers, and persisters’ life circumstances, personal resources, community college environment, and persistence behavior. Understanding students’ help-seeking behavior in college may be obtained to some degree by juxtaposing students’ narratives regarding what occurred in their immediate environments with their perception of challenges and how they responded to those challenges. What remains uncertain is why leavers who experienced academic difficulties engaged less in help-seeking while persisters, on average, sought out more help for their informational, social,
and to a lesser degree academic needs. If we return to students’ outlook (described in chapter three) for additional evidence, another pattern is found. Table 5.11 is an adaptation of Table 3.4 from chapter three. It shows a strong relationship between outlook (optimism or pessimism) and college persistence. In other words, when students’ outlooks are mapped against their college persistence behavior, it turns out that most optimists persisted while nearly all pessimists either never enrolled, withdrew, or were “lost” (i.e., no longer participated) halfway through the study. This association is likely not a simple relationship between two variables—outlook and persistence—but rather a convergence of life circumstances and personal resources (that is the foundation upon which individual outlook is built) with college features that exacerbate or mitigate what students bring with them to college. In addition, students’ attribution of their difficulties in college likely played a role in their choice not to seek academic help, especially if they also had no personal support system to help them think through challenges.

**Table 5.11:** Participants’ outlook (documented in high school) and subsequent college participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outlook within context of college</th>
<th>College participation behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Optimists</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Kylie</td>
<td>Early leaver&lt;sup&gt;58&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gilbert</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Charles</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. May</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Ella</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Art</td>
<td>Early leaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Willow</td>
<td>Early leaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. John</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Lisa</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Erin</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Jarvis</td>
<td>Late leaver&lt;sup&gt;59&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Taeshe</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>58</sup> This student actually stopped out. She withdrew during Fall of 2007 and returned to community college the term after. As noted in chapter six, stop-outs are not differentiated from drop-outs due to complications with some cases.  
<sup>59</sup> This student stopped out during the summer of 2008 and returned to community college the Fall of 2008.
13. Ken  Persister  
14. Xia  Persister  
15. Emme  Persister  
16. Tavis  Persister  
17. Kam  Persister  
18. Oscar  Early leaver  

**Pessimists**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Alaine</td>
<td>Late leaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Diane</td>
<td>Late leaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ray</td>
<td>Persister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Jordan</td>
<td>Late leaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Wayne</td>
<td>Late leaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Lana</td>
<td>Late leaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Sharon</td>
<td>Missing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Netta</td>
<td>Missing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Ellen</td>
<td>Missing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Randall</td>
<td>Late leaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Joseph</td>
<td>Non-entrant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Sonny</td>
<td>Non-entrant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Quin</td>
<td>Non-entrant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Michael</td>
<td>Non-entrant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Damond</td>
<td>Early leaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Jim</td>
<td>Early leaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Desiree</td>
<td>Missing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Individual-level and Institutional Influences on Student Outcomes**

As shown earlier, a student’s level of academic preparedness and personal circumstances are individual factors that can affect the student's college performance and the availability of support for college attendance. Non-entrants offered clear examples of how the convergence of two individual factors—significant academic issues and difficult life circumstances—encourage

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60 Connie and Tim are not included in this table of pessimists because neither participated in college enough so that they could be labeled as persisters with confidence. Tim had taken only one course by the third interview and Connie had taken none, though she reported doing paperwork for enrollment in the fall of 2008. In addition, three students—Bea, Niki, and Jenn—are not listed here as pessimists because they were “lost” after the first round of interviews, due to researcher error. Other students who were lost during the study are included in Table 11 because they chose not to participate in the last round of interviews. Their choice to do so is considered significant. One of the students who chose not to continue participating reported having a difficult time in and out of school.

61 Non-entrants are those who did not enroll in community college (during the duration of this study) after all despite their intentions to do so.
youths to obtain work immediately after high school rather than attempt college. The distinction between the two factors can be distinguished more readily when leavers are considered. Several of the early leavers—Willow, Oscar, and Jim—experienced challenging life circumstances at the start of community college; yet, they followed through with course taking in the fall semester. Their participation in college was reported in their college interview as motivated by their postsecondary goals. It may also have been a response to their perception of their own academic potential, conveyed in their high school interview. These three students illustrate how academic preparedness can make a difference even when familial and life circumstances are significant.

Among late leavers, the influence of academic under-preparation became apparent only with some time spent in community college. Though leavers such as Wayne, Diane, and Randall were able to earn adequate grades in high school, time spent in college (about one term) showed them that their academic ability was an impediment in the postsecondary path. Most of the late leavers (Jarvis is the exception) and a few of the early leavers (Damond and Kylie) responded to academic issues by disengaging—which took the forms of choosing “easy” transferable courses over academically challenging ones, repeating courses taken in the past, cutting down on the number of courses per term, and taking “applied” courses rather than academic courses. Such disengagement is somewhat subtle. More obvious forms include not seeking help for academic troubles and withdrawing from community college. When academic under-preparation was combined with life exigencies, as in the case of three late leavers—Randall, Lana and Jordan—personal circumstance was reported as the primary obstacle.

Persisters on the whole did not contend with the low level of academic preparation and lack of personal infrastructure that the non-entrants and some of the early and late leavers did. This last group was able to respond to challenges posed by the community college environment.
by seeking help for their informational and social support needs and, to a lesser extent, academic support needs. It appears that the two factors of adequate academic preparedness and stable familial and life circumstances can act to minimize the stressors of community college life.

In sum, the key findings from this chapter are that attrition among community college-going youths happens very quickly and that personal infrastructure and academic preparation interacts with the institutional features of community college to facilitate college persistence or withdrawal. Community college environments that do not provide adequate support for students make it more likely that students will withdraw at some point, resulting in a loss of momentum that (especially among some groups) is hard to overcome. Student reports from this study are important in that they identified institutional aspects of community college that contributed to their loss of momentum.
Conclusion

This study documented the experiences of a group of students who moved to and through community college. Despite their interest in the two-year college as a pathway to higher education opportunities, these students encountered personal and institutional challenges along the way that ultimately diverted more than half from their original intent. Their experiences are not uncommon within the community college population. Community colleges nationally struggle with stubborn credential and transfer rates, even while they have invested in new initiatives and interventions (Hayward, 2011). The problem of student attrition in this institution is especially important given that community colleges serve as a key portal to higher education for lower-resourced Americans looking for opportunity and mobility in the current challenging economic climate. Given the context, this is a qualitative case study of a cohort of students who moved directly to the public two-year college immediately after high school. I employed multiple in-depth interviews over a twenty-month period to investigate how study participants made their decision to enroll in community college during high school and how they perceived their college student experiences. Participants’ student experiences, defined as the interactions between the student and the college, along with their personal circumstances tell a story that highlights common institutional events all community college students go through and the range of responses individuals with varying personal resources take to institutional encounters.
Several key findings emerged from this study. When attrition occurs, it happens very quickly—the majority of the participants who withdrew did so between their first and second semester. Institutional conditions in community college, especially the (remedial) placement process, classroom experiences, academic advising, and financial aid advising, really mattered in participants’ assessment of their student experience. Participants who stopped-out or withdrew were more likely to struggle with remediation, which tends to be low level and uninteresting to them. While remediation is known to deter student motivation to progress in community college (the lower placement, the less likely students are to progress), participants in this study also show that transfer-level academic courses related to potential career interests were also problematic for leavers. Moreover, what is distinctive about students who persisted past the end of this study and those who did not is that persisters have in place solid personal infrastructure (which includes stable family conditions, even if those conditions are low income) which helped them navigate the challenges that arise along the way to transfer. These same students were also more likely to engage in help-seeking behavior for their informational and, to a lesser extent, academic needs. What students bring with them to college—their academic histories and outlook, as well as the skills and conceptions relevant to navigating college processes—play a part in students’ community college success and persistence.

Chapters three and four demonstrate that students’ college orientation and preparative behavior were profoundly affected by their social frames of reference and the college guidance received in high school. Chapter three shows how the social contexts of students’ lives play a significant role in shaping what they consider and anticipate during the college choice process. Motivations and preferences are not the same across
individuals but take on particular shapes that can only be fully understood when their social landscapes are considered. The frames of reference students used in their community college choice include their prior schooling experiences and the achievements of adult figures they affiliate themselves with. Low income African American participants, specifically, used family members and the neighborhood modal adult as their reference group in the process of college search.

Two groups of students were identified among the sample of participants—those who were confident in their college outlook and those who were fearful of potential negative outcomes. Students who were confident in their college outlook perceived community college as a strategic pathway to a four-year college that is aligned with their interests and goals. Some participants in this first group, for instance, saw the two-year college as a place where they can re-create their college profile in order to access a more elite college within the University of California system. Success is implied in their statements. Students who were less confident in their college outlook viewed community college as a place where they can prepare themselves for the academic rigor of “real” college. Academic success was uncertain for them and community college was viewed as a test. This approach can also be labeled a mobility strategy; however, I argue that how students in this second group frame their community college choice reflects a type of failure-induced approach, which encompasses a variety of specific strategies that emerged from their less optimistic frame of reference.

Chapter four investigates students’ perceived experience of college guidance practices employed by their high school. While school size and guidance approach varied among the four participating schools, what was common to all and what proved
consequential for participants is the very limited guidance specific to community college. Students experienced guidance within the small school environment as a high intensity, multi-target approach, which was viewed as effective in expanding the set of alternatives they considered; guidance in comprehensive high schools was experienced as a low-intensity, information-centered college guidance approach that wasn’t especially helpful. The mechanism by which small schools effectively reached students was the mentoring relationship fostered between teacher and student. Embedded in student reports is evidence that closer relationships allowed school agents to address individual concerns or fears and to introduce information that might not otherwise have fit with a student’s existing cognitive framework.

Students who attended the comprehensive schools, on the other hand, tended to rely primarily on their background knowledge, college norms among people they know, and personal relationships rather than institutional sources in their college decision-making process. Because comprehensive schools employ low-intensity guidance methods such as class presentations and college fairs (that are more efficient in reaching a large number of students), their students reported obtaining generic information about colleges rather than deep structure knowledge and individualized guidance. What is common with both types of school organizations, however, is that students only learned obvious information about community colleges, such as their transfer role in the California college system. Students were not prepared by any high school for important tasks they must undertake in college, such as choosing courses, developing an education plan, preparing for assessments, and navigating the curricular structure of transfer-track undergraduate education. Thus the assumption underlying the schools’ college-linking
strategy is that students already have the knowledge and skill set necessary to negotiate institutional conditions (i.e., policies, practices, processes, and programs) and to develop the social support structures essential to success in community college.

Chapter five focuses on three structural features of community college that proved consequential for students—assessment/placement, academic counseling, and the commuter campus environment. For students, remedial or transfer-level placement and education planning are critical factors in the process of moving towards transfer to a four-year institution. What was common among participants in this study, however, was their limited understanding of how to construct an education plan for their undergraduate study, which, in turn, contributed to their sense of uncertainty in the first year. Moreover, some did not fully understand the implications of remedial placement for time to transfer—partially because they came to community college without expecting their academic skills to be assessed. Counseling at their community colleges, unfortunately, fell short of preparing students in these areas.

Of the forty youths who volunteered to participate in this study, thirty (or 75%) students enrolled within twelve months of high school graduation. This finding indicates that participants were interested in pursuing college. But from the start, they reported several key challenging experiences, including inadequate assessment processes, limited support for course planning, and little incentive for utilizing advising over time. Of these, developing an education plan and tapping into advising are complex tasks that occur over time, and are dependent on a student’s skill set and a college’s resources. Peers was a source of support for college tasks, in addition to formal college resources; yet, participants in this study found that the commuter campus, with its distinct social
environment, offered limited points of access to informational pathways, which, in turn, significantly influenced their learning how to function in college—in other words, to undertake critical tasks such as obtaining informational, social and academic support. Exacerbating the challenges posed by the commuter campus environment was the minimal and inconsistent college guidance at the college district most participants attended. For example, students who went through the matriculation process received only brief academic counseling that focused on the immediate task of putting together a course schedule for the first semester rather than planning with a broader approach in mind. Over time, they expressed a strong need to understand the pathways they could take to reach their postsecondary goal and to get help making connections between academic courses and potential career options, but these needs were not fulfilled by existing counseling programs. Subsequently, students fell back on their prior knowledge and personal information resources to make curricular choices.

Chapter six maps participants’ progress in community college over a period of eighteen months. The experiences of participants in this study show that the college pipeline leaks significantly within the first year of community college enrollment, and not during the summer break period between high school and college. The largest portion of attrition happened between the first and the second semester. In other words, the loss of students happens very quickly. It appears that many do not persist continuously if they decide the institution is not a good fit, or if they decide the enterprise is not feasible (at least, not in the foreseeable future). Access to academic mastery appears to be a big part of students’ decision to continue participation in college. Both leavers andpersisters experienced academic challenges, but the former were much more likely to be placed in
remediation and struggled with “boring” classes. Boring is a term students used to refer
to a variety of things, including lack of interest, not understanding the curriculum in a
meaningful way, and/or predictable, low-level, passive learning classroom activities.
Boring could also mean getting trapped in pre-requisites, without knowing how all the
courses connect with potential career interests. Interestingly, the students who, early on,
got for transfer-level academic courses that offered a window into potential
majors/careers and who struggled with academics were in trouble too. Thus, the problem
isn’t that remediation is unnecessary, nor can the academic problem be solved by having
students enroll in low level remedial courses in conjunction with high level courses of
interest that do not offer scaffolding for these students.

A comparison of leavers and persisters’ responses to their environmental
conditions shows that, overall, leavers and persisters behaved reasonably in that they all
tried to minimize their stressors. The problem is that many late leavers minimized their
college-related stressors by disengaging from college and taking alternative routes that
offered a higher chance of success. Persisters, on the other hand, engaged in more help-
seeking behavior, despite the difficulties the community college environment posed.
They may have been more likely to do so because persisters, as a group, were better
positioned coming into college to handle academic challenges. They were also better
positioned in that they had stable personal infrastructure, unlike half of the leavers. Help-
seeking, along with personal support systems, made a difference, even with weak
academics. The question of why leavers were less likely to seek help for their academics
may be resolved when student narratives about their own academic experiences and their
reference group’s achievements in life are examined. When students’ outlooks (optimistic
or pessimistic), as documented in chapter three, are mapped against their college persistence behavior, it turns out that most optimists persisted while nearly all pessimists either never enrolled, withdrew, or were “lost” (i.e., no longer participated) halfway through the study. Students’ attribution of their academic difficulties, along with other college challenges, may have played a role in their choice not to seek academic help, especially if they also had no personal support system to help them think through challenges.

Students’ loss of momentum can, however, be accounted for to a large degree by the institutional conditions in their high schools and community colleges. The high school guidance experienced by participants on the whole focused on disseminating generic information about community college, and to a lesser degree assisting students with processes (e.g., completing financial aid applications) and addressing personal needs. While the process and motivational guidance offered by the schools were reported as important to students, high schools also need to broaden their definition of what it takes for students to successfully transition to community college to better position them to handle new challenges.

Similarly, the difficulties participants experienced at their respective community colleges were partially a result of the policies, practices, and programs at those colleges. Specifically, policies regarding the number of times a student may retake placement tests, instructional practices that result in decontextualized remedial and transfer-level curriculum, counseling programs that do not mandate students to connect with advisors and do not include impactful advising, and the processes embedded in assessments that result in placement tests that are not aligned with the college’s education programs are
examples of institutional conditions that contribute to students’ academic challenges and confusion.

The institutional conditions that work to create uneven academic experiences and to limit the guidance and social support for students have implications for leaders and practitioners at both high schools and community colleges. There has been a great deal of attention in recent years among researchers, policy makers, and practitioners on the transition to college, and efforts to increase access to college (including community college) have focused on a range of interventions, including academic pathways, creation of a college-going culture in high school, Bridge programs, and first-year experience programs such as learning communities. Innovations in developmental (remedial) education at community colleges are at the moment receiving much interest. These interventions address the challenges that are especially relevant to less advantaged youths. Innovations such as early and middle college high schools (high schools that blend high school and college, compressing the time it takes to complete high school and the first two years of college), career and technical education (CTE), and dual enrollment offer various academic (and sometimes vocational) pathways for students to enter postsecondary education, while Bridge and other first year programs in community college explicitly address both academic and social supports components.

Some of these programs (especially early and middle college high schools and learning communities) cannot be scaled to reach the large number of community college students, however. Moreover, the programs described above target a subset of the community college population, while many of the institutional barriers outlined in this study are common to all community college-goers. Another way of addressing the
challenges students commonly face is to organize services community colleges offer around the student experience. Historically, colleges have set up their operational infrastructures from an internal organizational standpoint (Rassen et al., 2013). For example, student services and instruction are housed in separate units and led by different leaders in an organization. (This makes sense in that there are clear lines of responsibility over functions.) But as documented in this study, students end up experiencing college services in a fragmented way that lead to confusion. Specifically, academic counseling (in the community college district most of the participants enrolled in) focus on delivering information in a very narrow context (within the structure of program or transfer requirements) while instruction functions in separate silos, unconnected to student services such as counseling and assessment processes.

When the student experience is used as an organizing concept, intervention is approached in a holistic and integrated way as opposed to a series of discrete solutions addressing different parts of the college experience. Approaching intervention in this way may require community colleges to rethink their practice at every level, from administrative policies to course instruction. It will also likely require the colleges to collaborate more thoughtfully with high schools. A key starting question to reform is, what should the student experience be? What are the key elements and what are the phases that students should move through to successfully reach credentialing or transfer? This study has shown that some of the student experiences reported are common to all. That is, institutional events such as assessment/placement, advising, instructional practices, and academic support services all impact the progress of students pursuing degrees. Tasks such as preparing for assessments, identifying a course of study (major),
education planning, finding financial aid options, and obtaining on-going high quality advising and social support were reported by all participants as important in their first year. Community colleges can examine the higher education and community college literatures to obtain direction for how they would like to conceptualize the optimal student experience and intentionally build services that structure the experience for optimal outcomes. It is important to note that any one student experience framework will probably not meet the needs of all students. But, addressing the needs of sub-groups should grow out of a core set of coherent and intentionally developed set of practices.

From the higher education literature, the framework of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975) has been used over the decades to examine college student experiences. Though useful in accounting for various strands of the student experience to predict persistence for the four-year institution, recent research on community colleges shows that obstacles to persistence is less about the mismatch between the skills students bring with them and a college’s academic standards (as theorized by Tinto) and more about the institutional practices regarding assessment, curriculum, and treatment (i.e., coursework, tutoring or other support) that contribute in a significant way to all students’ difficulties. In particular, the practice of adding to a remedial course sequence when students’ academic problems cannot be solved by regular courses, the low predictive power of assessment tests, and the prevalence of remedial pedagogy (i.e., low level drill and practice) have been found to enlarge the academic hurdle for students trying to progress to college-level courses (Roksa et al, 2009; Bailey, Jeong, and Cho, 2009; Hughes and Scott-Clayton, 2011; Grubb, 2012). In addition to the academic piece of the community college departure puzzle, researchers have also examined guidance and
student motivation as key drivers of student progress (Booth et al, 2013; Nodine et al, 2012). Thus, borrowing the academic and social integration framework requires modifications for use in the community college context.

My study contributes to this literature by documenting one cohort’s interpretation of their academic and social experiences in community college. I found that while the extent of remedial placement among my participants was consistent with what is documented in the community college literature, the students’ response to their academic circumstance varied. At one end, some students found their remedial courses unchallenging and consequently boring. At the other end were students who felt the developmental course(s) they were placed in to be too difficult. This finding corroborates the quantitative research on the (un)reliability of assessment tests; more importantly, it illuminates the process of disengagement that students undergo. The process begins with a test students aren’t prepared for (a result of weak high school and community college guidance) and develops into a series of academic experiences that destabilize students’ initial aspirations. How a student is prepared to respond, however, matters. Participants who resisted being placed into remediation appeared to have stayed engaged with college longer compared to those who were dissatisfied with developmental courses but went along with placement because they did not understand the implications of remediation (i.e., what it means for time to transfer or college credit). Students who became disengaged did so somewhat gradually, and disengagement took subtle forms, such as choosing “easy” transferable courses over academically challenging ones and taking “applied” courses rather than academic courses. More obvious forms include not seeking
help for academic troubles and finally stopping out or withdrawing from community college.

In many ways, academic experiences and social support interact synergistically for students. Half of all the leavers in my study experienced a loss of their personal support infrastructure during the first year of college while nearly all of the persisters maintained a stable and supportive family situation. Social support operated not only through individual circumstance, however; it also operated through the institutional features of a college. Participants who were able to obtain more informational and social support through college peers, faculty or counseling offices attained better academic experiences. For instance, those students who received accurate information about their college’s placement policy through instructors or counselors petitioned to re-take their assessment test. Within the classroom, students who experienced a more collaborative or social environment as a result of constructive teaching pedagogy were able to obtain more academic support from their peers and complete graded assignments. In this way, social integration for community college students is instrumental, and practitioners should consider the concept in relation to academic integration, given the commuter environment of two-year colleges.

This study’s longitudinal findings also have implications for research. First, high school counseling matters for the transition to college, including first year experiences. Students in this study received guidance that assisted them with threshold access—that is, taking the prerequisite steps to enroll. They did not, however, obtain what I call deep structure knowledge that would allow them, from the start, to undertake tasks such as creating an education plan, navigating the curricular structure of transfer-oriented
undergraduate education, and accessing academic and mentoring supports that would assist them with progress (the second type of college access). The problem underlying high school counseling for community college goers may have been the narrow conceptualization of what it takes to successfully transition to college. It may also have been an issue of how people conceptualized the two-year institution. Embedded in students’ comments is evidence that the high schools misconceived community college. One common turn of phrase participants used to describe their choice for community college during their high school interview is, it is a place where people can “get prerequisites out of the way.” Another is, community college prepares students for four-year colleges. While neither statement is untrue, there is a subtle suggestion that two-year colleges are a sort of interstitial space between high schools and four-year colleges, where students take courses for transfer from a predetermined set, not unlike the high school experience. The problem with this view is that in reality public two-year colleges have norms, practices and processes that fundamentally differentiate them from secondary schools, and as such their students must be prepared to manage the institutional conditions. Even among the few participants who participated in dual enrollment (the only form of high school-community college collaboration participants were exposed to), limited understanding of community college was the norm. Student interviews from my study show that there are potential consequences to maintaining these misconceptions, that includes first year curricular choices overly focused on prerequisites (often remedial courses) and a passive orientation to college policies and services. Future research could focus on exploring the ways high schools conceive college preparation.

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1 As noted earlier, I only examined high school guidance through students’ experiences of them.
and community college, and specifically how they construct guidance for community
college-bound youths based on such conceptions.

Another longitudinal finding from this study is that the frames of reference
participants used during the college choice process prior to college enrollment continued
to be influential over time. As documented in chapter three, the social contexts of
students’ lives played an important role in shaping what they considered and anticipated
during their college choice process. Immigrant narratives and the neighborhood modal adult, for instance, served as framing for students’ rationales for enrolling in college. Whereas the narrative about the purpose of immigration\textsuperscript{2} drove immigrant youths’ desire to expand life opportunities by extending their education, references to the impoverished neighborhood modal adult figure among low income (especially African American) participants steered them towards particular strategies for postsecondary education. One of these strategies is the community college, which was perceived as a known pathway that entails lower financial and psychic risks. This failure-induced approach, however, appears to have also influenced how students responded to academic situations once in college. As noted earlier, nearly all of the late leavers and a few of the early leavers responded to academic issues by disengaging. At one end, disengagement took the forms of choosing “easy” transferable courses over academically challenging ones, repeating courses taken in the past, cutting down on the number of courses per term, and taking “applied” courses rather than academic courses; on the other end of the spectrum, disengagement included withdrawing from community college and choosing short-term vocational training over transfer track education. A belief discussed in high school

\textsuperscript{2} This narrative, for the Asian and Latino participants, usually entails the notions of starting over and making a new, better life and the importance of family.
interviews was the notion that community college was a “test” for four-year college potential. Student attribution of negative academic situations in community college (such as low placement and struggles with remediation), then, may have played a role in their disengagement behavior. This study found a relationship between students’ outlooks and their college persistence behavior (i.e., most optimists persisted while nearly all pessimists either never enrolled, withdrew, or were “lost” during the study). A fruitful line of research from this point would be a focused investigation of how youths attribute educational success and failure during high school, and how they attribute success and failure once in college. Examining various contexts that develop students’ attribution theories—such as high school guidance or local neighborhood settings—have the potential of uncovering naturally occurring environments that positively shape student thinking and response to postsecondary challenges. Such research also has the potential of expanding our conception of college preparedness to include not only skills and knowledge to be developed in individuals but also social conditions that nurture academic identity.
References


California Education.


Development of the research question and the overall design

Towards the end of 2006, I talked with Norton Grubb about potential research areas that might be interesting to both the wider education research community and myself. He let me know that the transition to college was a topic that was (at that point) becoming more relevant. I decided to look into the topic because, as a former community college instructor, I had already spent quite a bit of time thinking about why students started to struggle very early on in their college career. The phenomenon of student disengagement was more apparent to me given that I had taught mostly developmental (remedial) composition courses that function as gatekeeper courses.

In formulating a research design for my dissertation study, I considered the possible approaches to answering the basic questions Norton and I discussed. Much had been written about the stubborn credential and transfer rates of community colleges, but there was almost no current, published research in higher education academic journals at the time that tracked the qualitative experiences of community college students over time. Thus, I decided that my focus would be on community college students. Several more decisions made early on worked to bound the study, including the choice to start examining students’ decision-making while they were still in high school. In these ways, I started from the beginning to build the conceptual bins that contributed to the dissertation’s framework.
It was clear from the start that the study would be a longitudinal study employing in-depth interviews over time to identify key issues that arise for students as they progress from high school to community college. I had also considered using student transcript data; but, it was not possible at the time to link high school data with community college data, and then there was the issue of permissions. Though I gained entrance to the top feeder high schools for a community college district in Northern California through my advisor’s professional relationships, accessing students’ transcript data was another matter. Ultimately, the design decisions at the start-up stage were made explicitly and by default.

However, I did not want the study to be a tight, pre-structured design, but rather a more loosely structured, inductively “grounded” approach to gathering data, given how little we knew about the subject in the local context. In the end, the design was somewhere between the two extremes. Some things were known about the topic—my community college background knowledge served as an asset—but not enough to construct a theory. Moreover, because so many cases (forty students) and multiple languages were involved, another student researcher had to be enlisted to assist me in some of the data collection. If both interviewers were working purely inductively, with no common framework or instrumentation, we would end up with less selective data overload and lack of comparability across cases. Thus, basic research framework, broad research questions, and sampling decisions were made up front, while instrumentation after the first stage was left open. Both inductive and deductive approaches were employed to obtain the most useful data possible. The following sections re-iterate some material from chapter one, where I first introduced the reader to the research design.
Research Design

I decided to investigate the transition process by focusing on students’ lived experiences within the two-year institution and collecting data over a sustained period of time to go beyond quick snapshots of “what” and “how many” information (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The case study approach employing multiple in-depth interviews over time offered an avenue to obtain rich data, the sort of data that might afford me the opportunity to assess causal relationships. Further, interviewing students as they engage in the activities of interest provided data grounded in both local context and the meanings people attach to actions, events, and processes in their lives. At a fundamental level, I believed it is people’s interpretation of their experiences and behavior that is most important in the study of college student behavior.

In the first phase of research, in-depth interviews had been conducted with 40 students in order to investigate the processes involved in the transition to college for community college-bound youths. The college choice making process was the focus of the first set of interviews. In the second phase of research, follow up interviews sought to understand students’ college experiences. Specifically, how did participants understand the relationships between their college and non-college experiences, on the one hand, and their interactions with their respective college and persistence behavior on the other? These last two rounds of interviews focused particularly on students’ perception of key institutional experiences within the first three semesters of college. Additional information from informal communication with participants between interviews and interviews with key administrators and staff at one community college district (where the majority of study participants ultimately enrolled in) were also used to contextualize
formal student interviews. However, since the administrator/staff data had been obtained in a separate research project I had been involved in (between 2007-2009), this information is kept in the background in chapter analyses. As Yin (2003) notes, the advantage of studying more than one source is to triangulate data. This study design is longitudinal and employs multiple sources of data to answer the following questions: 1) How does a high school senior make the decision to go to a community college and what are her global college plans?, and 2) How do students make sense of their interactions with their college and decision making regarding persistence? This qualitative design can potentially capture the longitudinal process and evolving nature of college goals, planning and persistence.

**Sampling**

Forty students initially participated in this study. Multiple methods were employed to recruit students for this research project, including printed advertisements, presentations made in classrooms and counseling sessions geared towards community college prospective students, and the snowball method. Students were not chosen randomly for this study because the high schools did not have access to students’ college plans. Instead, students were chosen primarily by their intention to enroll in a community college and their willingness to participate in the research project. In total, 21 males and 19 females voluntarily participated. 20 students reported themselves as African American; 9 reported as Asians (5 Chinese, 1 Filipino, 1 Cambodian, 1 Laotian, and 1 Vietnamese); 9 reported as Latino (6 are of Mexican descent, 1 from Peru, 1 from Honduras, and 1 from Guatemala); and 2 reported mixed ancestry. African American students are natives, while nearly half of the immigrant students are first generation. The
generational status of Latino students were complicated by residency status. Five of the students were undocumented and among these two were second generation.\textsuperscript{1}

These students were recruited from four secondary schools in the San Francisco Bay Area that were on the list of top ten feeder schools to a local community college district in the spring of 2008. The four schools varied in terms of organizational structure, demographics, and academic achievement. Two of the four high schools, Washington and Lincoln\textsuperscript{2}, were part of one administration at the start of this study. Most students attended the large comprehensive school on the main campus, while a small minority (students who did not do well in the large school) went to the continuation school at a different location. Of the four schools, Washington demonstrated the highest academic achievement and its racial and class composition was mixed. It also had the largest enrollment (over 3100 students in 2007-08). The third school, Roosevelt High, was also a large comprehensive school (1875 students in 2007-2008). It was primarily low-income (76\%) and “majority-minority” with Asians being the largest group (62\%). About a quarter of the student body was English Language Learners. The fourth secondary school, Wilson High, had a much smaller student population (316 in 2007-08) since it was only one among a community of three small schools located on a single campus. Like Roosevelt, Wilson was also a “majority-minority” school—with African-Americans being the largest group (59\%) and Latinos the next largest (35\%)—and was primarily low-income (64\%). Over a fifth of their students were English Language Learners (21\%).

\textsuperscript{1} That is, two came to the U.S. as toddlers.
\textsuperscript{2} Pseudonyms are used throughout.
Beyond organizational structure and student demographics, I was interested in the college-linking strategies high schools used. The two large comprehensive schools, Roosevelt and Washington, were similar in that they both employed a norm of low intensity advising. Neither school assumed the role of being “intrusive” agents in the college-linking process. They differed, however, in level of college guidance resources. Roosevelt was a low resource school while Washington had a solid/good level of resources to guide students through the transition to college. Both the continuation school and the small school were labeled as small school environments in this study because their school conditions allowed students the sort of college guidance available through closer student-teacher/staff relationships. Lincoln, the continuation school, had access to solid college resources (partly through their link to Washington), and used intensive advising to link their students to community college. Wilson, too, had a solid level of college resources, and used intrusive advising to link students to college, though they emphasized four-year institutions as a college option. Table A.1 outlines the characteristics of the high schools participants attended and the number of participating students from each school.

Table A.1 Characteristics of schools participants attended

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School environment</th>
<th>Student demographics</th>
<th>Academic achievement&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roosevelt</td>
<td>Comprehensive school</td>
<td>“Majority-minority” &amp; majority low income</td>
<td>Below the state average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Comprehensive</td>
<td>Mixed (race and low income)</td>
<td>Higher than the state average</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>3</sup> Academic achievement is a term used to indicate the academic preparation of the student body as a whole. The published API score (range was from a low of 1 to a high of 7 among the four schools) was used. Additional data such as graduation rates, SAT and AP exam participation rate, percentage completing UC or CSU requirements, and number of students attending UC were also used if available. Washington was the only school among the four that performed fairly well on all these measures. In 2007-08, it published an API score of 7 while Roosevelt and Wilson each had an API score of 1.
Though not every student in each school had an equal chance of being selected for the study (students’ college plans were not known to school personnel and there was not a cost efficient way to identify the entire population interested in enrolling in community college), the students who ultimately signed up to join this study reflected to some extent their school. For example, the greatest number of participants came from Washington, the largest school. Washington students, also, were mixed in terms of racial and socioeconomic background and tended towards stronger academic preparation. Participants from Wilson and Lincoln, on the other hand, were nearly all low income and African American, and mostly academically underprepared.

**Data Collection**

Data collected during Phase I and II include multiple interviews with each participating student. The first round of interviews took place at the schools the students attended, in the spring of 2007. The data was recorded and transcribed for analysis, and consisted of one (approximately) 60 minute semi-structured interview per student. The interviews focused on students’ college aspirations, expectations, and plans, educational experiences and attainment of close family members, processes they engaged in and various types of support they received at home and at school in exploring college options. Students were also asked about the nature of college counseling they received in high
school, their financial circumstances, college plans of friends, and how they narrowed their college options. They were asked to describe their perceptions of community colleges, what they expect life as a community college student would entail, and any worries or hopes they had about their transition to college and adulthood. Table A.2 lists the students who participated in the study and first round of interviews by school.

Table A.2 Students participants by high school origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Washington High</th>
<th>Lincoln High</th>
<th>Roosevelt High</th>
<th>Wilson High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. May</td>
<td></td>
<td>5. Xia</td>
<td>5. Connie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Art</td>
<td></td>
<td>8. Tavis</td>
<td>8. Ellen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Lisa</td>
<td></td>
<td>12. Michael</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Bea</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Kam</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the second and third rounds of interviews, a similar process of data collection took place. During the fall of 2007 (between September and December of 2007), follow up calls were made to all the students who volunteered to participate in the spring, with the exceptions of Bea, Jenn, and Niki (students who were “lost”\(^4\)). The second and third interviews focused on students’ decisions to follow through (or not) with postsecondary plans made in high school, whether their prior expectations of community college had been met thus far, enrollment experiences, academic experiences, opportunities and challenges met, institutional and personal supports obtained or needed during college

\(^4\) A second student researcher who worked on this study had lost their contact information during data collection.
attendance, and future plans. Table A.3 shows the patterns of community college enrollment and participation in this study up to the end of fall 2007. The total number of participants is listed as forty (the number of students who originally joined). By the summer of 2007, thirty-six of the forty had reported graduating and passing their CAHSEE (California High School Exit Exam). In total, twenty-seven enrolled in community college, and of those, one withdrew during the fall. Six reported delaying enrollment (for one or two terms) and four decided not to enroll. Three were lost due to researcher error.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Summer 2007</th>
<th>Fall 2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduated high school</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never enrolled</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in CC</td>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed enrollment</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attrition from study</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thirty-four participated in the second round of interviews, including the six who delayed enrollment and two who decided not to enroll after all. Interview questions for those who did not enroll in the fall differed from those applied to enrolled students, focusing instead on the events and decision-making that contributed to changed postsecondary plans. Of the twenty-seven who enrolled in community college in the fall, only twenty-six participated in full interviews (nearly all of which were conducted between September 2007 and summer 2008)...

---

5 This student (Kylie) could not finish her academic/course requirements in the fall so she withdrew and re-enrolled again the following spring term.
and December of 2007\(^6\)). One student, Jim, only spoke with me over the phone at the end of fall semester, confirming his enrollment\(^7\).

By the third round of interviews, conducted in the fall semester of 2008 (between August and December of 2008), the total number of participants from the original sample of forty who enrolled in community college at some point during the 2007-08 academic year had grown from twenty-seven to thirty-one. In addition, one student, Connie, reported enrolling for the fall semester of 2008, but since she did not participate in a third interview, her academic experiences in community college could not be confirmed. Table A.4, however, includes Connie in the number of participants who ended up enrolling in community college at some point within the duration of this study (thus n = 32).

| Table A.4 Enrollment behavior of participants at two points- Fall 2007 and Fall 2008 |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|
| Participants N = 40                          | Summer 2007    | Fall 2007     | Fall 2008     |
| Never enrolled                               | 4              | 4             |
| Enrolled in CC                               | 27             | 32            |
| Delayed enrollment                           | 6              | 0             |
| Attrition from study                         | 3              |               | 4             |

As shown above, by the third round of interviews, thirty-six out of the original forty students were accounted for during the 2007-08 academic year. Four youths are listed in the attrition box in Table A.4, but in reality, more than four were lost by the end of fall 2008. Though Tables A.3 and A.4 give a clear picture of participants’ community

---

\(^6\) Connie and Art are the exceptions. Connie’s second interview was conducted in August of 2008 when she moved back to the Bay Area. Art’s was conducted in March of 2008.

\(^7\) I pieced together information about this student’s community college enrollment from the phone conversation and a conversation with his friend Wayne, another participant in this study. Jim did not do a full second interview due to trouble with the law in the early spring of 2008.
college enrollment behavior over two points in time during Phase II of this study, to provide greater detail for both students’ enrollment behavior and participation in this study, I outline the proportion of students who participated in full interviews at three points in Table A.5, the proportion of participants who engaged in college at four points in time in Table A.6, and the individual students who engaged in leaving and persistence in the contexts of college and this study in Table A.7.

### Table A.5 Proportion of students who participated in interviews at three points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview 1 (spring 2007)</th>
<th>Interview 2 (fall 2007)</th>
<th>Interview 3 (fall 2008)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A.5 shows that one hundred percent (40 out of 40) of students participated in the first round of interviews conducted in the spring semester of their senior year of high school. By the end of the following fall semester, twenty-seven students enrolled in community college, six delayed enrollment, and four decided not to enroll in college. In all, 34 youths (85% of original cohort) participated in interview two (26 who enrolled, 6 who delayed enrollment, and 2 who decided not to enroll). Finally, by the end of fall 2008, 27 youths (67.5% of original cohort) participated in interview three. The three students (Bea, Niki, and Jenn) who were lost (due to researcher error) soon after interview one, the four students who decided not to continue participating in this study (they did not respond to my phone calls and emails) after interview two, and the four students who decided not to enroll in college at all (and thus were ineligible for interview
three) were not part of the third round of interviews. In addition, two students, Jim (an early leaver) and Connie (who delayed enrollment) did not do interview three.

Table A.6 Proportion of students who enrolled in & withdrew from community college

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation N = 40</th>
<th>Fall '07</th>
<th>Spring '08</th>
<th>Summer '08</th>
<th>Fall '08</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in CC</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumulative # who had enrolled</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion who withdrew</td>
<td>1/27 (3.7%)</td>
<td>7/29 (24.1%)</td>
<td>12/30 (40%)</td>
<td>11/32 (34.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A.6 shows that while the number of participants who did follow through with postsecondary plans made in high school is fairly high (32 or 80% of the original cohort), along the way quite a few students were “lost.” The second column indicates that twenty-seven participants enrolled in community college in the fall of 2007 and within that group one withdrew late in the term (only to re-enroll again the following spring). Thus, 3.7% of that group engaged in leave-taking in the first term. The third column shows that by spring of 2008, twenty-nine participants had enrolled. But during that time, seven had also left the college track. This seven includes 5 early leavers (who left before spring semester and did not return to the system during this study) and 2 late leavers (who reported withdrawing in early spring and did not return to the system during this study). The fourth column indicates that by the summer of 2008, 30 of the original 40 participants had enrolled in community college within the 2007-08 academic year. 12 participants had also reported having withdrawn at that time. This group includes 7 late
leavers and 5 early leavers. The fifth column indicates that 2 more from the original 40 enrolled in community college by the fall of 2008 (n = 32) and one among the 12 who disengaged earlier re-enrolled in the fall (n =11). While these numbers suggest that a large portion of enrollees leave the system at some point, they do not include the students who decided not to continue with this study (n = 48) and those who decided not to enter community college after all (n = 4). (Such inclusion would inflate the number further.)

Table A.7 lists the students by participation behavior. Note that the asterisks by Kylie and Jarvis denote that they stopped out briefly and re-enrolled. Tim and Connie are treated in chapter five within the discussion of persisters, but in actuality their persistence beyond one term of enrollment could not be verified since both delayed enrollment and entered community college at the tail end of this study.

### Table A.7 Students categorized by participation behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-entrants (n = 4)</th>
<th>Attrition (n = 7)</th>
<th>Early leavers (n = 6)</th>
<th>Late leavers (n = 7)</th>
<th>Persisters (n = 14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8. Emme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9. Taeshe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10. Erin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11. Ken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12. Xia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>13. Lisa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14. Tavis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15. Tim*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>16. Connie*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

8 Ellen and Netta did not respond to phone calls I made by spring of 2008 and did not confirm their enrollment for spring of 2008. Sharon and Desiree may have enrolled in spring of 2008 (we spoke over the phone) but did not participate in interview three.
Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred over multiple stages of the research process. During Phase I of data collection, when I made contact with counselors and teachers at the four high schools to set up recruiting events, I began to write memos about the school settings. The memo writing continued throughout the interviewing process, to record the conditions surrounding each interview and the informal communications that occurred before and after each interview with student participants. The observations I made complemented the data I gathered from the formal interviews to generate a fuller picture of each participant and identify issues that I needed to keep in mind as I started to devise strategies to help me maintain contact with the youths (many of whom I suspected were hard-to-reach) over time. Summaries and initial analysis of the first round of interviews were also written during Phase I of data collection to identify topical areas that seemed particularly interesting, areas that I thought I should pursue in the next round of interviews.

In Phase II of data collection, a similar process of preliminary data analysis took place. I wrote brief summaries of each interview and observations made about the conditions surrounding the interviews, as well as informal communications with each student. Initial analysis of the second set of interviews informed my planning of the next set of interviews. The informal communication with students over the first year of college turned out to be critical to developing subsequent interview questions. I was not able to anticipate all the events that students found important in their first year of enrollment, and students did not always offer full explanations during formal interviews (for various reasons). By the time I reached the third round of interviews and written student survey, a mountain of student-level data had accumulated.
By the time I completed all student interviews (twenty months after the first set began), I had actually already engaged in a deeper analysis of the data. I developed a matrix of conceptual bins after I engaged in a within-case and cross-case analysis of the high school set of interviews. The individual student was the unit of analysis, and cross-case comparison was enabled by the standardized interview protocol. The flexibility of the interviewing process—which allowed impromptu follow-up questioning—gave me opportunities to account for context with each case, however. Even with just one set of interviews that first year of data collection, I felt the amount of data from the forty interviews and accompanying observation notes was unwieldy. Subsequently, I imported the documents into the Atlas.ti software to create categorizations and conceptual relationships in different ways.

My initial framework provided the codes I created early on. For instance, I drew from the college choice literature to begin my analysis of how student decision-making around college choice occurred.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CODE</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FAM</td>
<td>Family context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCIALNET</td>
<td>Peers at school; peers from neighborhood; friends at school; friends from neighborhood; adults who talk to student on regular basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARENTEXP</td>
<td>Parental expectations for college; parental expectations for achievement behavior; parental expectations for social behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLLEGEEXP</td>
<td>First exposure to idea of college</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For each student, I coded the interviews in the software program, then synthesized the information in each code into a brief summary with references back to the original interview transcript. Next, I created larger conceptual categories to place similar individuals (those who matched the descriptions of college preparatory behavior).
B

Student Interview Protocol 1

Introduction: (~ 5 minutes)

- Introduce the research study – its goals and interviewer’s role
- Discuss confidentiality – no identifying information will be divulged.
- Have interviewee sign consent form (or parent if subject is younger than 18)
- Discuss logistics of interview – how much time, taped recordings, transcripts, etc.
- Remind subjects there are no wrong answers.
- Provide interviewee opportunity to ask questions before starting interview.

Interview: (~ 45 minutes)

The follow up questions indicate probes that the interviewer may use if the subject does not voluntarily address the issue in his or her answer to the main question.

1. I know that people choose to go to college for different reasons. Why are you choosing to go to college?

2. When did you first start thinking about going to college?
   - Who or what first exposed you to the idea of college?
   - What do you know about college?
   - What type of degree are you aiming for?
   - Have your family members or relatives gone to college? What was their college experience like?
   - Is your college and career decision typical of your family and friends? (If decision is atypical: Tell me why you departed from the norms in your family.)
   - Do you ever talk with family and friends about what will happen after your high school graduation? If so, what do you talk about? Tell me about the last conversation you had with (insert reference as appropriate).
   - How do your parents and the rest of your family feel about school? Would you say they preferred you to continue with school or get a full time job?
   - How about your friends?
   - Do you know what your friends plan to do after graduation? If so, tell me about the plans of one or two friends who stand out in your mind.
   - Do you know what some of the other students at your school plan to do after graduation? If so, can you tell me if many are going to college?
• Are there adults at school you turn to to talk about school, college, or career issues? How would you describe your relationships with these adults?

*Alter the wording of the next question if student is also considering a four-year college. Question can read: How did you decide on these colleges?

3. How did you decide to go to community college?
   • Who or what influenced your decision?
   • Is there anything outside of your control you feel has influenced you in making your decision to go to a two-year college?
   • Have you encountered any controversy when making your career or college decision? (or, have people disagreed with your career or school decisions?)
   • What do you know about the community college(s)? What programs are offered at the college(s) of your choice? Do these programs meet your needs?
   • What would you do if you don’t go to college?

4. Do you think you are on track to go to college? Why or why not? (Find out if student is still thinking about college in an abstract way or if plans are becoming more concrete.)
   • Do you think you are academically prepared for college level work? Why do you think so?
   • Do you think you are personally ready for college? Why do you think so?
   • What do you think needs to happen for you to successfully transition to college?

5. How does it feel when you think about college?
   • What are you most nervous about when you think about college?
   • What excites you when you think about college?

6. How do you envision your first year?
   • How do you imagine college as compared to high school?
   • Where will you be living?
   • Will you have a job?
   • Any other plans?

7. Is there anything else you would like to add before we end the interview? What else is important for me to understand how you’ve made the decision to go to (use college name) and your plans for the next year?
Student Interview Protocol 3

**Introduction**: (~ 5 minutes)

- Introduce the research study – its goals and interviewer’s role
- Discuss confidentiality – no identifying information will be divulged.
- Have interviewee sign consent form (or parent if subject is younger than 18)
- Discuss logistics of interview – how much time, taped recordings, transcripts, etc.
- Remind subjects there are no wrong answers.
- Provide interviewee opportunity to ask questions before starting interview.

**Interview**: (~ 60 minutes)

**Current educational goals**

1. Could you describe what your education goal(s) are now?
   a. Has anyone or anything (in particular) played a role in shaping your goals?
   b. What do you hope to accomplish by the end of fall semester?

**Enrollment status**

2. Have you continued to enroll in community college since we last spoke?
   *If yes,* has enrolling in school so far helped you reach your goal(s) of __?
   *If not,* why did you decide to do something other than school?
   a. What opportunities has doing x opened for you? What do you gain from it?

**Second semester courses**

3. Which courses did you enroll in during spring semester?
4. Which of these courses did you complete? What encouraged you to complete these courses (and not other ones)?
   a. Can you tell me of a time in during the spring semester when you thought a class was going really well? What happened?
   b. Can you tell me of a time in during the spring semester when you thought a class was *not* going well? What happened? How did your professor respond? Did s/he notice?
5. Could you describe the professors who taught the courses you took?
   a. Do you think your professors have been good teachers? Why or why not?
b. Are they supportive? Do you talk to them about your goals or when you need help?
c. What could your professors do to be more supportive of you?

**Relationships with professors and classmates**

6. In general, how would you describe your relationships with your classmates?
7. Did your relationships with your professors or classmates help you stay on task with your assignments or maintain your motivation to complete your courses? Please explain.
8. Why are some classroom relationships more important than others?
9. Are you part of any study groups?
   *If yes,* can you tell me what you gain from being part of the group?
   *If not,* can you explain why you choose not to participate?

**Use and knowledge of student services**

10. Do you use any of the student services on campus? Which ones do you use?
11. How did you find out about these services?
12. Do you know about any other student services on campus? Which ones?
13. Do you need financial aid? How did you get financial aid?
14. Have you gotten information you need from counseling? Who or what has been most supportive in helping you get information about courses, programs, careers and transfer possibilities? If your school counselors are not the ones helping you out the most in this area, please explain why.
15. What other types of counseling do you think the college should offer?
16. How important is tutoring to you? Who or what has been most supportive in getting you help on school assignments?
17. Are you involved in any organization on campus?
   *If yes,* please explain why you joined these organizations.
   *If not,* is there any reason why you chose not to join them? What are they?

**Perceived challenges to completing degrees**

18. What do you think are obstacles to completing your community college degree?
   a. Current family obligations?
   b. Work and financial demands?
   c. Language barriers or language course requirements at the college?
   d. Time invested in basic skills (remedial) classes?
   e. Social relationships that distract from college work or attendance?

**Sources of support and information about college**

19. As you’re going to school, who do you get the most emotional and mental support from?
20. What or who gives you valuable information about teachers, classes, career opportunities, and how to be a college student in general?
a. Why do you rely on these people as opposed to others for information on your college?

21. (This question refers to student response to question 13 on questionnaire.) Which of these information sources are most important? In other words, why do you rely on these sources more?
Student Questionnaire: Please fill out this confidential questionnaire. Thank you! Should you have any questions, feel free to ask. Date: ________________

I. Educational Background

1. What is your parents’ highest educational degree? (If your parents are “in between” categories—that is they completed some high school or some college but did not obtain a degree—please check the “other” category and explain.)
   Mother: □ middle school □ high school □ A.A. or occupational degree □ Bachelor's □ Other: ___
   Father: □ middle school □ high school □ A.A. or occupational degree □ Bachelor's □ Other: ___

2. Do you have older siblings who completed 4-year college? □ Yes □ No
3. Did you receive your high school diploma? □ Yes □ No
   If yes, please specify the month and year: ____________

4. How well did your high school academic program prepare you for college courses?
   □ Excellent preparation □ Good preparation □ Fair preparation □ Poor preparation

II. Current College Work  If you have enrolled in college at all in the past twelve months, please complete this section.

5. How many college units have you earned? ____________

6. Do you have a program major? □ Yes □ No
   If yes, please specify: __________________________

7. Have you taken extended (non-transferable/remedial) Math or English courses? □ Yes □ No
   Please list the extended (non-transferable) Math and/or English courses you have taken. Next to the course name/number, check one of the boxes. If you enrolled in a class but did not complete it, check the “enrolled” box. If you completed the course, check the “completed” box.
8. Have you repeated any courses? (i.e., you’ve taken a course again to earn a passing grade)  □ Yes  □ No

9. Have you used campus tutoring services?  □ Yes  □ No

10. How many times have you met with a counselor or faculty advisor to plan your course taking? _____

11. Have you participated in a learning community at your college?  □ Yes  □ No

12. How many colleges have you attended? _______

**III. Sources of Information**

13. College students often need information about career options, which teachers to take, how to find additional financial aid, various student services, and so forth. How often do you rely on the following sources for information to assist you in college?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of info</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family members</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselors</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial aid office</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DSPS</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EOPS</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer Center</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puente</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IV. Challenges to Completing College

14. Community college students often have responsibilities that may interfere with their studies. Please indicate which challenges you have experienced in college and to what degree.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Very difficult</th>
<th>Difficult</th>
<th>Somewhat difficult</th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest in college</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family obligations</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer pressure</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work/finance</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language barriers</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended courses</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College itself</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

V. Future Orientation

15. Do you want to transfer to a four year college? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Maybe
If yes, when do you plan to transfer? __________________________________________

If not, what is your degree or study goal? ________________________________________

If maybe, what would help you make the decision to transfer? ________________

16. How confident are you about reaching your educational goal?

☐ Very confident  ☐ Confident  ☐ Somewhat confident  ☐ Not confident