# EDUCATIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION AND TRANSFORMATIONS: LIFE-HISTORY ANALYSIS OF FIRST-GENERATION, ADULT COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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My paternal grandmother often told me stories about her childhood in the small, rural town of Osage City, Kansas. In one such story, Grandma recalled making a trip to the local library to check out several books. Clutching the new books, she stood in front of the librarian eager to check out and carry these treasures home. The librarian slowly lifted each book, examining the titles. Then, the librarian looked down at my grandmother, examining her. “This book is not for girls,” the librarian flatly pronounced. Grandma did not remember the title of the book she wanted to read, but her description of the confusion, hurt, and anger the statement produced in her was vivid and real.

When my grandmother related this memory to me, I could see the anger behind her blue, watery eyes. I could also see the hurt. She was affected by this brief interaction even 50 years afterwards. When one hears that something is “not for her” the message causes moments, or a lifetime, of doubt. Even if one does not believe the message, the meaning continues to nag at our consciousness. Grandma decided to sneak the book out of the library the next time she was there. Her resistance seems small and personal, but in reality, like all acts of resistance, it was large and important. Her act of defiance and her telling of this story impacted my educational trajectory and ultimately the completion of this dissertation. For this reason, I dedicate this dissertation to my grandmother, Bettie Jean Nelson Tucker.

I continue to be awed and inspired by the stories of those who are the first in their family to attend college and those who attend college as adults. Their bravery, commitment, and passion continue to motivate me. My hope is that this dissertation honors these students and their life stories.

I owe gratitude to many people who impact my life in significant ways. I credit Ms. King, my high school teacher, for influencing my decision to attend college. She showed me a letter from the department of Human Development and Family Studies on Kansas State letterhead and suggested that I “check it out.” Deborah Kay Dickinson Marszalek has seen me through it all – grade school, middle school, high school, college, graduate school, life. Thank you for always being there, sister. Finally, my husband, my partner, my love, Chad Eric Taylor, you have opened up ideas and worlds that I did not believe existed. I traveled around the world and back again, only to find that what I was looking for was in Oklahoma all along. Thank you for loving me.

When I began this endeavor, I hoped to make a difference, however small, in the educational lives of others. This goal has become more personal with the birth of my son, Atom Nelson Taylor, who shows me everyday that all children are born artists, scientists, and visionaries. I never want you, or any other child, to loose your natural curiosity and wonder. You challenge and inspire me to continue my own educational journey. Thank you.

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Abstract:

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore how educational identities were formed and transformed within educational institutions over the lifespan and how the identities were related to decisions about education. Cultural (re)production theories provided the framework for analyzing the ways which inequality was reproduced through social institutions, specifically educational institutions. This research utilized a life-history approach to explore the educational identities of first-generation, adult students enrolled in the first year of an associate degree program at an urban, multi-campus community college in the Midwest. The life-history narratives revealed that schools are important sites where students interpret messages about who they are within educational institutions. These messages form educational identities that impacted educational decision-making. Educational identities were not fixed, but transformed over time. For the participants in this study, distressing early educational experiences contributed to the formation of educational identities that were disengaged, self-critical, and dejected. These educational identities contributed to the students' decisions not to attend college directly after high school. Later in life, life circumstances pushed first-generation, adult students to consider enrolling in college. Educational identities formed during early schooling shaped initial emotions about returning to school. Students discussed cognitive and behavioral strategies they used to overcome self-doubts related to educational identities and features of the community college environment that enabled transformation of educational identities. The findings have implications for cultural (re)production theories and school reforms related to educational inequality, including student engagement and college enrollment stratification.

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# CHAPTER I:

## INTRODUCTION

This research was an examination of how educational identities were formed and transformed within educational institutions over the lifespan and how the identities related to decisions about education. The research described and explained the social construction of educational identities from the standpoint of the participants. A life-history approach was used to explore the educational identities of first-generation, low-income adult students enrolled in the first year of an associate degree program at an urban, multi-campus Midwestern community college. To gain information-rich data for in-depth study, a purposeful sample of 15 open-ended semi-structured, life-history interviews were conducted with individuals who had recently entered a degree program at a community college.

Studying educational identities was the intersection of two areas of sociological interest: education and identity. In the context of higher education, adult students provided the opportunity to study two social phenomena of interest to sociologists. The social phenomena of interest included how institutions of education reproduced social class (Bourdieu and Passeron [1977] 1990; Levinson and Holland 1996) and how identities were shaped through social interaction within specific settings. The knowledge gained through this research may help to provide insight to inform educational and social policy.

This chapter includes a summary of the background and context that framed this study, followed by a description of the problem and the purpose of the study, and leading into the specific research questions that guided this study. The chapter continues with a description of the researcher's background and assumptions prior to beginning the study, followed by the overall research design. A discussion of the rationale and significance of the study are included, followed by definitions of key terms used throughout the study.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The changing nature of work and the increased emphasis on credentialing to obtain and/or keep employment has led many adults to enroll in undergraduate degree programs to begin or complete a college degree. Since 1970, the number of adults 25 and older enrolled in college has nearly tripled (National Center for Educational Statistics 2004). As of 2006, this age group accounted for nearly 38 percent of the total number of students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities (Stokes 2006). Many community colleges and universities, both public and private, responded to this need by offering degree completion programs for adult students (Reay, David, and Ball 2005). Unlike specific job-related training programs, enrollment in a college degree completion program, whether supported by or required by an employer, represents a substantial commitment of time and resources by the adult student. Adult students find themselves looking for new employment after workforce reduction in jobs they have held for a long period of time (Elman and O'Rand 2002).

The importance of a college degree for improving life chances is now recognized at the national level. On July 14, 2009, President Obama presented the American Graduation Initiative to an audience at Macomb Community College. The main point of

this initiative was to increase access to and applicability of degree programs at community colleges. The goal was to provide training to students, including many adult students, as well as to help workers find new employment and alleviate the economic downturn. In his remarks, President Obama recognized that community colleges offered "a place where people of all ages and all backgrounds–even in the face of obstacles, even in the face of very difficult personal challenges–can take a chance on a brighter future for themselves and their families" (Obama 2010:para. 8).

The American Graduation Initiative provides grants to community colleges to create programs related to regional employment and President Obama wants to create a research center to determine which educational programs work. He stated,

> If a parent is going to spend time in the classroom and away from his or her family–especially after a long day at work–that degree really has to mean something. They have to know that when they get that degree, this is going to help advance their goals. If a worker is going to spend two years training to enter into a whole new profession, that certificate has to mean that he or she is ready, and that businesses are ready to hire. (Obama 2010: para. 33)

The third part of the American Graduation Initiative is to fund programs that will track student progress both inside and outside the classroom to determine the barriers that prevent students from finishing a degree and to then remove those barriers. President Obama remarked, "Maybe it becomes too difficult for a parent to be away from home, or too expensive for a waiter or a nurse to miss a shift. . . The point is, we need to figure out solutions for these kinds of challenges." (Obama 2010: para. 35)

As recognized in President Obama's speech, adult students generally hold full-time employment, have family responsibilities including children and aging parents, and are engaged in community activities. When adult students enroll in a college degree program, they have to learn how to juggle all their other responsibilities (Hammer,

Grigsby, and Woods 1998; Home 1997). The cost of college attendance is an additional financial burden and is compounded by accruing student loan debt. Many adult learners hope that the additional student loan debt will be alleviated by higher earning power. However, for many adult students, such loans may or may not be paid in full by the time the adult student reaches retirement age, making the financial payoff of completing a degree questionable (Elman and O'Rand 2004).

In addition to the complications associated with attending college as an adult, many adult students are the first person in their family to attend college. First-generation college students are defined as those who are the first in their families of origin to attend college (Billson and Terry 1982). First-generation college students are likely to be older than those who are not first-generation college students. Among first-generation college students, 31 percent are 24 years old or older, as compared to only 5 percent of those whose parents have a bachelor's degree (Choy 2001). First-generation college students often face more challenges in college than do those whose parents attended college before them.

An abundance of literature relates to the challenges faced by first-generation college students. The documented challenges faced by such students include a lack of college preparedness and knowledge, low family income, inconsistent family support (Choy 2001; Horn, Nunez and Larry Bobbit 2000; Stage and Hossler 1989; Thayer 2000), and difficulties making cultural transitions (Inman and Mayes 1999; London 1989, 1992). Interestingly, even though a high percentage of first-generation college students are also adult students, very little research has addressed the challenges and strengths of

this specific sub-group of first-generation college students: adult students (Zwerling 1992).

Adult, first-generation college students face many of the same obstacles, but also encounter some potential areas of divergence. The obstacles adult students face vary from those faced by their 18-22 year old counterparts. Adult students chose not to attend college directly after high school; must balance work, family, and community responsibilities; and made a decision to return to college later in life. Their life experiences in the labor force and as parents provide insights and knowledge that can act as strengths when entering the college environment (Byrd and MacDonald 2005; Giancola, Munz, and Trares 2008). This particular combination of life circumstances provided an interesting opportunity for sociological investigation.

## PROBLEM, PURPOSE, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The economic and social benefits of attending college directly after high school are well-documented (Aud et al. 2011), yet many people do not attend college at that time (National Center for Higher Education 2012). Many social factors influence the decision to attend to college, such as academic preparation, economic ability, and parental influences. Often, individuals make decisions that reproduce the economic realities of their parents, and in effect, reproduce inequality in society (Bourdieu and Passeron [1977] 1990; Levinson and Holland 1996; Willis 1977). Such decisions are often embedded in the individuals' identities and economic realities. Later in life, economic and social influences again propel the individuals to make new decisions about their education, when they must reconcile previous educational identities with the new reality of attending college. Little research has taken place on how identities are formed and

transformed within educational institutions over the lifespan. This study provided a way to explore how education and the social construction of identity coalesce to shape the identities and decision-making processes of first-generation, adult students.

This research contains descriptions and explanations of how educational identities are formed and transformed within educational institutions over the lifespan of a group of participants. The findings revealed how the identities related to decisions about education. The research results described and explained the social construction of educational identities from the standpoint of the participants.

Multiple avenues are available for sociological inquiry into this particular phenomenon. My original motivation for studying adult learners developed from a desire to understand how early educational experiences influenced students' beliefs about their educational aptitudes and their decisions about additional education over the lifespan. Studying adult learners allowed for an inquiry into broader, more fundamental sociological concerns such as the social construction of identity, (re)production of inequality, resistance to inequality, and intersectionality. The research questions below guided this research project. Understanding these important aspects of the social construction of positive educational identities for adult, first-generation students enhanced understanding of the development of educational identities.

(1) What is the role of early educational experiences in shaping students' educational identities? How do these early experiences affect decisions about attending college?

(2) What life experiences or changes in the field create a shift in dispositions that lead to enrollment in a college degree program later in life?

(3) How do students (re)align the educational identities developed in early educational experiences with their new role as college student? How does

the culture of higher education support or detract from the development of positive educational identities?

## RESEARCHER BACKGROUND AND ASSUMPTIONS

While conducting this study, I worked in academic administration at a community college. Prior to entering a doctoral program in sociology, I was employed full-time in a student services capacity, working primarily with adult students beginning or returning to college after a gap in their education. Many of the students were first-generation college students. As a student counselor, I heard many stories about what led students to enroll in college. The stories were as varied as the individuals who told them, but patterns emerged in their stories and commonalities of experiences that I began to notice over the years. My experience with these students and their stories attracted me to this particular research.

The commonalities I noticed in the stories led me to begin to formulate suppositions that guided this research. First, I noticed a trend in stories revolving around early childhood educational experiences. The experiences in educational institutions were influential in the students' beliefs about themselves as knowledgeable or capable learners. The beliefs became part of their identity, leading to specific self-talk about their college-readiness or college-worthiness. The beliefs were amplified when the students' stories had links to specific family experiences related to education that discouraged or repressed the student's ability to attend college directly after high school.

Second, many of the students recounted a significant life event that led them to reconsider and eventually enroll in college as adults. Third, enrolling in college forced the students to reflect on and sometimes redefine how they identified themselves as knowledgeable and capable learners. Over the many years of hearing such stories, I

began to articulate some ideas about how family, education, and economic factors interacted to influence students' beliefs about self and their decision-making processes.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

To explore the research questions, a qualitative research design using a critical sociological approach was chosen. Specifically, a stratified purposeful sample was enlisted to select individuals with particular characteristics related to the research question and to provide a means for comparison. Effort included participants who identified as male and female, multiple racial and ethnic identities, and ranging from 30 to 59 years old to explore how educational identities were shaped by the intersection of age, social class, race, and gender. First-generation students between the ages of 30-59 were recruited for in-depth interviews focusing on their educational experiences across the lifespan. Each student was currently enrolled at a community college, had completed less than 24 total credit hours, and received financial aid based on financial need. In total, 15 students participated in interviews. The interviews lasted approximately one and one-half hours, were digitally recorded, and were transcribed verbatim. The interviews provided the information for the findings in this study.

To explore the educational narratives and identities of adult students, the in-depth semi-structured interviews had a critical and feminist qualitative research design. Critical research paradigms focus on how power, control, and ideology are involved in understanding social reality, while feminist research paradigms aim to uncover parts of the human experience that may be hidden or subjugated under traditional or positivist research paradigms (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). Critical and feminist research methodology has the potential to transform the research process away from the researcher

as sole power and authority to a collaboration of knowledge construction between the researcher and the participants (Greenwood and Levin 2008; Miskovic and Hoop 2006). Using critical research is consistent with the goals of research as an applied function. Critical research is consistent with my theoretical perspective and with the ideals of adult learning in general.

According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006), the interview is a meaning-making process between the researcher and the interviewee, where the goal is to reduce the division between the roles and to form collaboration in the knowledge creation process. The overall goal of in-depth interviews is to gain descriptive and explanatory data on a specific topic in a single interview. In-depth interviews allow the researcher to obtain knowledge from the participants. The knowledge includes complex information that results in rich data for later analysis and interpretation. In-depth interviews are useful to understanding the social realities of those who are marginalized from society and are used extensively in feminist and critical methodologies. In-depth interviews are useful in "accessing subjugated voices and getting at subjugated knowledge" because "those who have been marginalized in society, such as women, people of color, homosexuals, and the poor, may have hidden experiences and knowledge that have been excluded from our understanding of social reality" (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006:123).

Drawing on feminist research methodology, which emphasizes reflexivity, this study focused on the importance of interaction and interpretation on meaning construction. An inductive, thematic analysis was chosen to determine the meaning adult students attached to these issues as well as how the issues affected their view of self in relation to others. The interview data were organized to identify themes across narratives.

Storytelling is an important process of human communication and is used to make meaning of experiences and communicate with others about the meanings of the experiences. Through storytelling, people are able to process experiences, reflect on them, and contextualize events into personal lives. Atkinson (1998) posited that the life story narrative is an important experience for both the researcher who is gathering data and the persons telling their stories. The process allows the storyteller to make sense of important experiences, influences, and life lessons. Atkinson explained, "[S]tories are our way of organizing, interpreting, and creating meaning from our experiences while maintaining a sense of continuity through it all" (1998:7). The life history narrative can highlight how the storyteller "uses adaptive strategies to reconcile and resolve conflicts of the past" (1998:7). Therefore, the most suitable way to analyze the negotiation of educational identities was through life-history research or life story interviews (Atkinson 1998).

A life-history approach allows people to highlight the turning points in their lives, a process that addresses the primary questions of this study: How educational identities are formed and transformed within educational institutions and what social forces push individuals to enroll in college later in life. One of the primary benefits of life-history research is it allows the understanding of developmental processes. The narratives produced through the life-history interview are the best way for a researcher to understand a person's life experiences and their personal interpretations of events and feelings (Atkinson 1998).

Life-history interviews (Atkinson 1998) were conducted with individuals who had entered a college degree program as an adult, were between the ages of 30 and 59, were

first-generation college students, and received financial aid based on need. The life-history interviews were semi-structured, allowing the researcher latitude to follow up on emerging issues and themes that were not apparent prior to the interview. Although primary questions were asked, the focus was on probing the respondents' answers for a deeper and more extensive understanding.

After identifying a line of inquiry (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006), an interview guide for the semi-structured interviews was developed. The purpose of the interview guide was to identify key issues relevant to this research while allowing the participants some freedom to discuss issues relevant to them. In this research, the emphasis and scope of the life-history interview evolved around early experiences in educational institutions, identity development within those institutions, choices made about education, and educational identity transformations within the social context of educational institutions.

## RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE

U.S. society commonly believes that higher education is a means through which people can gain access to the middle class. The documented benefits of higher education include higher earnings, lower unemployment rates (Aud et al. 2011), and more optimism about the future (Mbilinyi 2006). For those who work in higher education, a significant issue is providing equitable access as well as programs for those who are historically underrepresented in higher education institutions.

Social and cultural reproduction theory provides a framework for analyzing the ways in which inequality is reproduced through social institutions, specifically educational institutions. The foundational work, *Learning to Labor*, by Paul Willis (1977) investigated how working-class "lads" interacted and interpreted messages through

schooling and labor. Often the lads actively rejected messages about succeeding in school because of their knowledge that their "place" was to labor. Other researchers built on Willis's research, adding gender and race into the analysis (Levinson and Holland 1996).

One of the ways this study investigated the (re)production of inequality through education was through the examination of the social construction of educational identities over the lifespan. Social constructionism provided the foundation for understanding how experiences are interpreted and given meaning. Understanding how students interpret and give meaning to educational experiences and how these meanings affect behavior informed the central research question regarding the social construction of educational identities. Previous studies on first-generation, low-income, or adult students tended to have a psychological perspective on identity formation and adjustment to the college environment (Kaufman and Feldman 2004). My research specifically focused on the meaning first-generation, low-income adult students attached to educational experiences, using the sociological perspective of social construction. This perspective in turn developed the framework for understanding the social construction of educational identities.

Empirically studying identities is difficult except through how individuals enact it within a specific cultural context. The social construction theory proposes that culture emerges through interacting actors. Through human interaction, actors negotiate and produce cultural understandings. Actors do not simply react to the environment, but interpret and give meaning to interactions. Society is created through these interactions. Sociologists also argue that not only is society created through these interactions, but also the "self is created through social interactions; however, cultural interpretations of the

"self" are not fixed. New experiences offer actors the opportunity to revise and amend the meanings attached to various interactions (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Blumer 1962; Mead 1934).

The investigation of the social construction of educational identities helps to refine theories of cultural (re)production and resistance. Theories of cultural (re)production and resistance examine how social inequalities are reproduced through social institutions. Educational institutions are key locations for the formation of identities. The ways in which individuals interpret and give meaning to educational messages can reproduce those messages, produce new messages, or resist messages altogether. Reproduction, production, and resistance of educational messages may result in similar social outcomes. The theory informed the central research questions and the guiding questions by determining how early experiences kept students from entering college directly after high school and what brought them to higher education in later life.

Findings in this research illuminated the ways in which educational institutions reproduce inequality. However, first-generation, low-income adult students actively resist their place in the class system by seeking a college degree. Through the life-histories of these students, this research examined how inequality was reproduced in early experiences but later resisted, leading students to enroll in a college degree program later in life. For example, the interpretation and meaning adult students attach to early educational experiences affects their decision not to attend college earlier in life, but later, such educational identities were transformed, leading adults to enter into a college program. Students revise and refine their educational identities based on educational

experiences within the college environment. Through such evaluation, cultural (re)production and theories of resistance can be expanded and refined.

Because education is often criticized for reproducing inequality, its implicit bias surfaces in the ways students from higher income backgrounds usually excel over low-income, first generation students. In the social sciences, categories of difference, such as class, race, and gender, often are treated as distinct areas of analysis. The concept of intersectionality provides a way to begin to recognize how systems of oppression and privilege are interrelated and interconnected.

Patricia Hill Collins (1991) offered a framework for understanding the interlocking systems of oppression, which she expressed as a *matrix of domination*. This framework illustrates the commonalities among systems of inequality, rather than using an additive analysis of the systems. Collins posited that all groups experience both oppression and privilege within a socially constructed system. Because the experience of each person is unique, we must understand the contexts in which inequality exists. Such understanding shows how inequality is constructed, who does the construction, and the interlocking nature of the systems of inequality. Previous research, particularly on adult college students, tended to treat social class, age, gender, and race independently of each other. Intersectionality is directly related to the concepts of interest in this study.

In addition to the contributions of this study for sociological theory in social constructionism, cultural (re)production theory, and intersectionality, the findings offered practical applications. Educational institutions interested in providing equitable educational experiences can learn how specific interactions in a student's early education can influence the educational identities of the student by identifying common experiences

that lead students to develop disadvantageous educational identities. Moreover, this research can help educators develop curriculum and programs that are more likely to lead to beneficial educational identities.

Educational identities are reflexive and continue to transform over a person's lifespan. Higher education institutions interested in serving adult students, particularly first-generation, low-income students, can apply the findings from this study to program and curriculum development and implementation. Other adult students may also find this research helpful in their own pursuits of a college degree.

## DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMINOLOGY

- Adult student: defined as a student age 30 to 59. The baseline age of 30 is higher than the federal financial aid definition of "independent" student, which is 24, because I was interested in students who had significant life and work experiences after high school. The upper age was limited to 59, to limit age-specific cohort effects to a 30-year span.
- First-generation: defined as a student whose parents or grandparents did not attend or graduate from college. This more narrowly defined first-generation than did Billson and Terry (1982) by excluding those whose parents or grandparents attended college, but did not graduate.
- Low-income: defined as a student who qualified for Federal Pell Grants or received other state benefits or scholarships based on financial need, such as displaced worker grant.

- First year: defined as students who had completed between 6 and 24 credit hours, including non-credit developmental courses taken on a college campus. The student could be enrolled full- or part-time.
- Identity: defined as a person's understanding of who he or she is. The term includes those with whom the individual identifies and those with whom the individual does not identify, and the perceptions of social groups by the self and others (Vincent 2003). Theoretical work on identities suggests that identity is not a fixed or static concept, but rather a fluid and transforming concept. Hall (1993) explained, "Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But. . .far from being externally fixed in some essentialist past, they are subject to the continual play of history, culture and power. . .identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past" (Hall 1993: 394, as cited in Vincent 2003).
- Educational identity: defined as the understanding of who one is through the meaning attached to subjective experiences within educational institutions and the experience of social position within educational institutions (Moore 2006). Educational identities are formed through interaction and interpretation of meaning, and therefore are continually reinterpreted and modified by social interactions over time (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000).

## ORGANIZATION OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters. This first chapter contains an introduction to the research study, including the problem, purpose, and research questions. Chapter I includes a brief description of the research approach and rationale and concludes with definitions of key terms. Chapter 2 has details of the theoretical perspectives that guided this research and contains an in-depth review of the relevant literature on college enrollment stratification, first-generation college students, adult college students, and educational identities. In Chapter 3, I provide specific information about the methodology chosen for this research project, including demographic data of the sample and limitations of the study.

In Chapter 4, the findings and analysis relate the ways in which the participants interpreted early educational experiences and how the experiences contributed to disadvantageous educational identities. Findings and interpretations continue in Chapter 5 through a discussion of the social shifts that led participants to enroll in college later in life. Chapter 6 details the process participants used to (re)align educational identities within the college environment and the students' perceptions of changes in their educational identities. Finally, Chapter 7 contains conclusions from the findings and analysis and provides recommendations for future practices and research.

# CHAPTER II:

# REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This research was an investigation of how educational identities were formed and transformed within educational institutions over the lifespan and how the identities were related to decisions about education. The research had descriptions and explanations the social construction of educational identities from the standpoint of participants. Specific theoretical perspectives related to the social construction of educational identities informed the research questions in this study. In this chapter, I summarize the major theoretical perspectives that guided my research: cultural (re)production, theories of resistance, and feminist standpoint theories. I review and synthesize the relevant research on college enrollment stratification, first-generation students, adult students, and educational identities.

Specific theoretical perspectives related to the social construction of educational identities informed the research questions in this study. Cultural (re)production theories offered insight into how adult students made sense of early educational experiences and how the experiences influenced the formation and transformations of educational identities. Feminist theory provided insights for framing the study, making methodological decisions, and analyzing the findings. These perspectives offered a means to analyze the influences of intersections of social class, race, and gender with educational experiences and identities.

The economic and social benefits of attending college directly after high school are well documented (Aud et al. 2011), yet many people do not attend college at that time (National Center for Higher Education 2012). Despite the overall growth in college enrollment over the last two decades, students from low-income families have lower levels of college enrollment than students from higher income families (Perna and Jones 2013). Many social factors influence the decision to attend college including previous educational experiences, academic preparation, economic ability, and parental influences. Often, individuals make decisions that reproduce the economic realities of their parents, and in effect, reproduce inequality in society (Bourdieu and Passeron [1977] 1990; Levinson and Holland 1996; Willis 1977).

## CULTURAL (RE)PRODUCTION THEORIES

Social and cultural (re)production theory provided a framework for analyzing the ways in which inequality was reproduced through social institutions, specifically educational institutions. The foundational work, *Learning to Labor* by Paul Willis (1977), investigated how working-class young men interacted and interpreted messages through schooling. Often the young men actively rejected messages about succeeding in school, because of their knowledge that their "place" was the labor force.

Theories of cultural (re)production explain how schools can instill either a sense of knowledgeable self or a sense of failure in students (Levinson and Holland 1996). The approach is particularly valuable to understanding the complex ways an educated person is produced through educational experiences. The role of schools in reproducing social inequality is much debated (Bourdieu and Passeron [1977] 1990; Fernandes 1988; Levinson and Holland 1996; Luttrell 1996; Morrow and Torres 1998).

Levinson and Holland (1996) discussed the major theoretical shifts in understanding how the educated person is a product of education. Critical education study is a reaction to the assumed role of schools in reinforcing individualism and meritocracy, that hard work or effort is more important than other structural factors (Levinson and Holland 1996:4). The main methodology used by researchers under the assumption of meritocracy is the outcomes-based survey. As scholars used methodologies that were more critical, such as historical/ethnographic research designs, new theoretical perspectives developed to explain how schools perpetuated social inequality. A more critical approach focused on education as a place where groups were indoctrinated into the needs of capitalist interests rather than a place where individuals could gain advancement through education.

Using this new approach led to the development of social and cultural reproduction theories positing that educational institutions trained individuals and groups to take their places in the class system. The structure of educational institutions, while allowing individuals to make any number of choices, continued to produce individuals who behaved in predictable ways. Like the working-class lads in Willis's (1977) study, low-income youth in the United States are less likely to enroll in college directly after high school than are those from middle or upper-class backgrounds (Perna and Jones 2013). Awareness of the choices people make and how they act in specific social circumstances emerges through understanding the concepts of *habitus* and *field*, as described by sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu ([1972] 1977; [1987] 1994; 2005). Habitus works together with the concept of field to understand the ways in which people interact

with the social world. We can ask the question: What is the relationship between our disposition and the current situation?

Sociologists have long been interested in the interaction between social structures and human agency. Social structures pre-date individuals and provide the framework in which we interact in the world, yet individual social agents are able to act in the world; sometimes following the rules of the social structure, but also redefining social structures through social action. Bourdieu ([1987] 1994) attempted to reconcile the push and pull of structure and agency in everyday life through the concept of habitus. Scholars agree that social agents are free to act in any given number of ways, yet social agents are predictable. Many social situations have no explicit rules of behavior, yet behavior appears to follow particular patterns. Through the concept of habitus, Bourdieu sought to understand how behavior is shaped by our world without following specific rules. Bourdieu asked, "How can behaviour be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules?" ([1987] 1994: 65).

According to Bourdieu, social agents possess habitus as a way of being, or disposition ([1980] 1990). The dispositions are structured by past and present circumstances and provide guidelines for acting in the future. For example, early educational experiences provide experiences that lead to particular ways of being. Social agents in schools that emphasize control and memorization will interact with individuals to create dispositions that work well in that social environment. Such dispositions tend to be stable over time and between different social settings, but can change over time.

Bourdieu ([1972] 1977) described the field as the context in which we live, encompassing the physical and social spaces we occupy. Field is a way of

conceptualizing the social spaces we occupy. This is where social interactions and social events occur. Using the concept of field allows us to understand the ways in which the social space influences the habitus and practices of the individual within the field (Bourdieu [1972] 1977).

Educational institutions represent a field or a boundary site (Thomson 2008), where learning is supposed to take place. The educational institution is a field consisting of positions made up of social agents such as teachers and students. What happens in the field is boundaried by the conditions of the field. Within the boundaries of the field, social agents work to maintain or improve their position.

Those with specific forms of capital may already have an advantage within the field. Capital consists of economic, cultural, social and symbolic forms (Thomson 2008). In the higher education field, credentials represent symbolic capital. One can use personal capital within a specific field to gain more. For example, those with economic capital and parents who attended college, who represent cultural capital, can use the capital to gain further education for themselves.

In addition to the concepts of habitus and field, Bourdieu's concepts of *cultural capital* and *symbolic violence* are helpful in understanding the hidden mechanisms that reproduce inequality (Bourdieu and Passeron ([1977] 1990; Levinson and Holland 1996). Cultural capital refers to the learned symbolic acts and behaviors that show social standing. These character traits, often described as *tastes,* are given legitimacy by those with higher social standing. Tastes can include things like literature, art, music, dress, speech, and consumption, and often denote signs of intelligence to those with power in society. When people are rewarded for their tastes through recognition as legitimate

intelligence, the cultural capital is converted into economic capital. Those with lower social standing in society do not have access to or are not able to achieve the cultural capital needed to advance into the higher classes.

Cultural capital is then related to Bourdieu's concept of *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu and Passeron ([1977] 1990). Symbolic violence refers to the negative sense of self developed by those who are not in the elite class because of their inability to achieve cultural capital. The legitimate knowledge defined by those with elite status is believed to be universal and objective, when in reality it is arbitrary. Particular cultural tastes, such as classical literature or music, dress, travel, and housing, are seen as signs of intelligence. These signs of legitimate intelligence are tested by IQ tests and GRE scores, which are positioned as objective measures. Those without access to cultural capital develop a sense of self that is limited. Because the true illegitimacy of these tests is hidden, they commit symbolic violence on the lower classes (Bourdieu and Passeron ([1977] 1990).

Levinson and Holland (1996) discussed two criticisms of cultural (re)production theories to expand the theoretical reach of the perspective. One criticism was the privileging of class over other forms of inequality, such as race, gender, and age. Another criticism was that the theories tended to be Euro-centric and deterministic. One response to these criticisms was the development of the *cultural difference approach* of schooling. This approach focuses on how minority students sometimes do not adapt well to white, middle-class schools. A criticism of this approach is that it downplays social/historical structures that create the situation of maladjustment. The remediation for those who do not adjust to the current structure of the school is to change the person, not the structure.

To address some of the criticisms of the cultural (re)production and cultural difference approaches, cultural production theory was developed to provide a greater focus on the agency of subjects (Levinson and Holland 1996). Cultural production theories acknowledge that class is reproduced through education, but also acknowledge that people are not passive receptacles of culture, but rather, people interact and interpret cultural messages. Subjects can and do actively resist middle-class culture and ideology. However, one of the possible issues with cultural production theories is the researchers found that even acts of resistance to ideology usually lead social actors to seal their fate into the lower classes. The classic work relating to cultural (re)production theory, Willis's *Learning to Labor*, failed to include issues of race or gender in the analysis. Levinson and Holland (1996) explained that Willis' work left some additional questions unaddressed, including how to conceptualize and theorize gender and race.

Levinson and Holland (1996) introduced the concept of the cultural production of the educated person and explained the concept as the complex way in which people are shaped by and respond to social forces. The authors explained, "For while the educated person is culturally *produced* in definite sites, the educated person also culturally *produces* cultural forms" (Levinson and Holland 1996:14). This perspective "allows us to portray and interpret the way people actively confront the ideological and material conditions presented by schooling" (Levinson and Holland 1996:14). An important point of this perspective is that cultural production in school affects all aspects of life, and "outside the school, in diverse spaces of street, home, and family, other kinds of 'educated persons' are culturally produced as well" (Levinson and Holland 1996:15).

Fernandes (1988) further refined cultural (re)production theories by articulating a theory of resistance. He proposed that reproduction included two levels: the reproduction of the sexual division of labor and indoctrination into the dominant ideology. According to Fernandes, global resistance included resistance at both levels; only one level of resistance was referred to as "partial resistance" (Fernandes 1988:174). Fernandes proposed that the sociology of education include a study of social and cultural reproduction, multiple and interrelated forms of social inequality, and "spaces that make possible resistance. . .and the sources and mechanisms that cause, promote, and reinforce this resistance" (Fernandes 1988:177).

Fernandes (1988) offered specific definitions of concepts related to the theory of resistance as an alternative or elaboration to theories of cultural (re)production in education. He distinguished between the concepts of resistance and contestations. Resistance was defined as "counter hegemonic social attitudes, behaviours, and actions which aim at weakening the classification among social categories" (Fernandes 1988:174). These are directed toward those who have and exercise power and are aimed at redistribution of power to a more equitable system. Contestations are defined as "oppositional, conflicting, or contesting attitudes, behaviours and action" that lack "transforming and emancipating potential" (Fernandes 1988:171).

In addition to the above refinements to the understanding of (re)production and resistance, others articulated gendered dimensions of cultural (re)production theories in education. Feminist standpoint theory provides a gendered complement to theories of cultural (re)production and resistance. Arnot (1982) argues that any theory about class reproduction must also consider gender reproduction. The two concepts cannot be

considered independent of each other. Arnot (1982) maintained, “If one definition of femininity or masculinity is dominant, it is the product of patriarchal relations and also the product of class dominance, even though these two structures may exist in contradiction” (Arnot 1982:66). Arnot used the concept of hegemony rather than reproduction to analyze gender and class in education. Hegemony refers to “a whole range of structures and activities as well as values, attitudes, beliefs, and morality that in various ways support the established order and the class and male interests which dominate it” (Arnot 1982:66). Arnot posited that using the concept of hegemony allowed the ability to acknowledge the dynamic nature of learning and the ways in which “the power of dominant interests is never total nor secure” (Arnot 1985: 66). Because hegemony is dynamic, active, and negotiated, maintaining the system requires consent by members of a culture. To gain consent, gender differences are an important component of male hegemony, because these differences are maintained as “natural” and women “are encouraged ‘freely’ to choose their inferior status” (Arnot 1985:66).

Arnot (1982) believed that traditional theories of inequality in education suffer two specific challenges: (1) a belief that educational differences between women and men require educational solutions and (2) a neglect of class-based inequality. The main point is that if educational equality for boys and girls exists without addressing class, then girls and boys from working-class backgrounds will have the same disadvantages. There will then be equal oppression based on class, even after addressing gender equality.

Arnot (1982) proposed developing a theory of cultural (re)production that included a feminist perspective of women’s education and addressed class concerns under capitalism. She maintained that a premise of such a theory be an understanding of

gender as an arbitrary construction of society that is dynamic, not fixed or universal. One of the ways male hegemony persists is through schooling, but the upper classes have the ability to transmit gender messages through education.

Schools have the ability to use gender codes to transmit student identity, but students also actively participate in the creation and interpretation of such messages. Arnot pointed out, “The experience of learning the principles of the dominant gender code is therefore the experience of learning class relations, where working class family culture is given illegitimate and low status at school” (Arnot 1982:85). In summary, Arnot maintained we must recognize that gender relations and class exist in educational institutions. She stated, “Somehow our research must capture the unity *and* the diversity of the educational lives of women” (Arnot 1982:85).

In an ethnography of women enrolled in college, Holland and Eisenhart (1990) demonstrated the deficiencies of cultural (re)production theories in explaining the interrelated and complex ways in which structural systems of class and gender inequality are produced, reproduced, and maintained. The authors summarized and offered critiques of common theories used to explain gender inequality and class inequality in education. They looked at how the theories fell short of explaining intersections of inequality, such as among class, race, and gender. Holland and Eisenhart offered the possibility of utilizing production theory and practice theory to help explain how peer groups of college women produce and maintain class and gender systems. Practice theory allows consideration of the differences within gender categories, enabling analysis of different forms of femininities and masculinities.

For example, in their analysis of peer group pressure on young women to form romantic relationships with young men, Holland and Eisenhart (1990) demonstrated how young women negotiated the hegemonic discourse of romance. Not all the young women responded to this discourse in the same way. Examples supported cultural-production theories by showing how women created their own discourse within the dominant culture. The examples also supported practice theory by accounting for differences among women. The authors did not treat all women as one heterogeneous category, but rather allowed for variations within gender.

Cultural (re)production theories and theories of resistance had important implications for the present research and were applied and critiqued during the analysis of the data. The life-history narratives of first-generation adult students revealed the complex ways in which the educated person was produced through schooling, families, peer culture, and workplaces. Levinson and Holland's concept of the cultural production of the educated person and Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, cultural capital, and symbolic violence were relevant when evaluating adult students' educational experiences over the lifespan.

Conceptualizing resistance and contestation was useful in analyzing the ways adult students resisted and contested the dominant ideologies and educational identities. By analyzing first-generation, adult students' patterns of resistance and contestation, I was able to identify some spaces, sources, and mechanisms that promoted resistance and educational identity transformations. Such concepts were helpful in analyzing the interaction of early educational experiences on student dispositions and educational decision-making. The concepts were also helpful in understanding how students resisted

and reinterpreted messages from their early educational experiences to recreate new educational identities for themselves through higher education.

Feminist standpoint theory adds a gendered dimension to the analysis of (re)production in education. The narratives of women and men from working-class backgrounds enabled analysis of the diversity and unity of educational experiences and identities based on class and gender. In addition to utilizing feminist standpoint theory in the analysis of cultural (re)production, this research included application of insights from feminist theory in framing the study, making methodological decisions, and analyzing the findings. The following section contains highlights of some insights from feminist theory that guided this research.

## INSIGHTS FROM FEMINIST THEORY

Feminist theory is based on the contention that knowledge is contingent and dependent of the social context in which it is created. Previously, the social context in which sociological knowledge is created is mainly a male-dominated paradigm. The knowledge created is based on male lives and is socially situated in class, race, and culture (Harding 1986; Longino 1993). These knowledge claims tend to depict women and other marginalized groups as others or outsiders. Feminist theory challenges knowledge and frameworks that tend to marginalize and essentialize women (Harding 1991). One of the questions feminist theory seeks to understand is how knowledge is created and how power is exercised and reinforced through the construction of knowledge.

Smith (1987) critiqued sociological practices by applying a Marxian analysis of ideology. Ideology maintains power structures and makes real lived experiences invisible.

Within the field of sociology, concepts and categories reflect social relations. Collins (1991) argued that knowledge is a central component to maintaining power structures in society.

Feminist theory provides a framework to criticize dominant knowledge claims within the social sciences (Harding 1991). Feminist theory is a diverse framework in which to analyze the creation of knowledge in sociology and education, particularly the creation of categories reflecting power relations. Knowledge is created within the sociologist's or educator's situation and does not constitute objective reality. Rather, the knowledge created in sociology and education reflects procedures, methods, and relevance of the subject matter from a deterministic perspective of society, as if the social categories we use in the research are not social creations used to maintain power. Sociologists and educators organize subject matters in a determinate position in society. Feminist theory provides an inquiry into the creation of knowledge to illuminate the relations of ruling that create traditional sociological knowledge (Smith 1987).

Women's positions as ruled and ruler give unique perspective to see sociological ideology and allow them to discredit sociology's claim to objective knowledge (Smith 1987). Smith advocated an alternative sociology that begins with knowledge creation from the lived experiences of women, who have an insider's perspective to fill the gap left from so-called objective knowledge. The categorization and knowledge claims of sociology are seen as natural. The knowledge claims found in documents gain power through the growth of bureaucracies and by categorizing, classification, statistics, and reports. The insider knowledge can reveal the power constructions within the text. Smith

tried to recover that silenced voice through dialogue with lived experience. Power is not located in the text, but is exercised by those who rule through the texts (Smith 1987).

Feminist theory stresses the use of qualitative methods and critiques positivist models that assert objectivity and privilege the researcher over those who are researched. Feminist theory recognizes the role of power in research, where the researcher has the power to define and write the results. When women and those from other marginalized groups speak from their reality about their views, they reveal parts of the social order that sociologists and educators may not see. Such insights help to understand, describe, and theorize about the construction and maintenance of social order and structure (Harding 1991).

Hartsock (1995) suggested the possibility of developing a critique of domination through knowledge of women's lives in Western capitalist societies. As strangers or outsiders, women can identify patterns that are not easily seen by natives or insiders (Harding 1991). Feminist theory advocates using women's everyday lives as a means of constructing knowledge (Collins 1991; Harding 1991; Smith 1987). Harding believed the differences in women's and men's lives provide a resource for understanding patterns of oppression. A primary point of this perspective is that women's lives are not deviant or inferior, but merely different. These different voices from women must be heard within the context of their lives (Harding 1991).

Feminist theory emphasizes knowledge of the oppressed because it is more likely to offer possibilities for social change (Collins 1991; Hartsock 1995). Using the perspective feminist theory can focus on gender differences in experience, but also can seek to emancipate. Feminist theory can uncover oppression and show acts of resistance

to the status quo; feminist theory focuses on understanding and changing oppressive practices (Collins 1991; Smith 1987). One of the ways feminist theory can be transformative is by allowing women to speak of their struggles. Encouraging women to speak of their lived experiences addresses the issue of finding a voice; of learning how to speak (Harding 1991).

One of the advantages of feminist standpoint theory is the inclusion of emotion into social analysis. Western knowledge tends to separate reason and emotion into two separate spheres, but feminist standpoint theory weaves them together. In this perspective, one cannot understand reason independent of emotion or emotion independent of reason. Both reason and emotion play a role in knowledge creation. The concept of value-free knowledge is a myth (Rixecker 1994).

Insights from feminist theory provided important foundations for the methodology and analysis of the present research. First, feminist theory provided a framework for the critique of dominant ideologies. The framework was applied to illuminate current knowledge claims and assumptions about educational attainment. Second, feminist theory provided a methodology that included knowledge from marginalized groups and individuals. Including lived experiences of marginalized groups, such as women and men from low-income families, provided insider knowledge not found in dominant knowledge claims. Third, feminist theory provided a framework for resistance and social change. The position and experiences of marginalized groups in society were revealed through research and can be improved by incorporating feminist perspectives and methodologies.

Cultural (re)production, theories of resistance, and feminist theory all provided a foundation for exploring educational identities in first-generation, adult college students, particularly those who were from disadvantaged backgrounds based on class, race, or gender. In addition to providing a theoretical foundation, feminist theory offered specific methodology principles that informed this research; these are discussed in more detail in Chapter III. In the next section, I review personal and social advantages of earning a college degree in our society and perspectives related to college enrollment stratification. Next, I review the previous literature related to the areas of interest in this research: first-generation college students, adult college students, and educational identities.

## COLLEGE ENROLLMENT STRATIFICATION

The personal and social advantages of earning a college degree in our society are numerous (Aud et al. 2011; Hout 2012; Jones 2013; Perna and Kurban 2013). Hout (2012) reviewed the research on the social and economic gains associated with higher education. The individual level advantages to earning a college degree include lower likelihood of being unemployed, shorter periods of unemployment, higher incomes and lifetime earnings, fewer health problems, greater marital and family stability, and higher levels of general happiness, compared to those who did not earn a college degree. Even those who obtained a two-year degree or certification after high school showed some of the same advantages over those who only earned a high school diploma.

The social advantages to increases in college degree attainment in a community include increases in productivity. These increases appear among those without degrees as well as with those who have earned degrees in social settings where more people have earned college degrees. Other social advantages include increased revenue from sales,

property, and income taxes; lower use of public assistance; and lower crime and incarceration rates. Those who graduate from college are also more likely to vote, to be knowledgeable about social issues, and to volunteer in their communities than are those who did not graduate from college (Hout 2012).

Jones (2013) discussed similar advantages to individuals and society from increased college enrollment and completion. College enrollment and completion were associated with higher earnings, greater job satisfaction, higher voter rates, higher rates of charitable giving and volunteerism, lower rates of incarceration, and lower rates of public assistance utilization. The many advantages to college degree attainment make college enrollment stratification an important issue of social inequality.

To fully understand the factors related to the advantages, Hout (2012) examined the sociological research on the personal advantages of earning a college degree. Some critics proposed that the advantages of higher education are based on selection bias, or the personal traits of those who attend college, rather than on the obtainment of the degree itself. To address these critics, Hout analyzed several empirical studies in this area.

Hout (2012) concluded that earning a college degree is actually more beneficial to those who are least likely to attend college. For example, in studies of college open admission policies, the advantages of higher education were greater for those who would not have been admitted based on previous admissions standards than for those who would have been admitted. This finding tended to contradict the common belief among educators that opportunities should go to those students who have the highest abilities. For example, those who score well in early education are allowed to take more

challenging courses in high school, and colleges take this into account when making acceptance decisions. “The effect of education was biggest for students who were least likely to go to college and smallest (though still significant and substantial) for students most likely to go” (Hout 2012:385). The constraints normally associated with family background did not have an effect on the occupational success of those with college degrees. “Education affects the occupational success of lower-origin workers more than higher-origin ones” (Hout 2012:386).

In the United States, college enrollment increased by 71 percent in the last 30 years, and was projected to increase by another 12-17 percent within the next 11 years (Jones 2013). Many public policies and programs aimed at increasing college access and completion, such as need-based financial aid, bans on discriminatory admission practices, and programs like Trio and Upward Bound, increased college access to underrepresented groups. Yet, as Jones (2013) pointed out, even with all the improvements in access to college enrollment, inequality still exists for low-income students and those from racial/ethnic minority groups. Jones asserted a need to continue to develop new strategies and programs to reach out and support potential students and their families in order to provide more equitable access to higher education.

Goyette (2008) found that the expectation to attend college was increasing, and becoming a norm in the United States. However, the expectation to attend college varied by family income and parental education. Students from low-income families were less likely to expect to attend college than were those from higher-income families. The difference in expectations to attend college became reality when students graduated from high school. College enrollment of recent high school graduates remained stratified by

family income, with students from high-income families attending at higher rates than those from low-income families (Perna and Kurban 2013).

The stratification in college enrollment by family economic factors had increased in recent years. The percentage of low-income students who did not attend any college directly after high school increased from 20 percent in 1992 to 23 percent in 2004 (Perna and Kurban 2013). Several researchers examined factors related to college enrollment stratification (Grodsky and Jones 2007; Kim, Sherraden, and Clancy 2013; Morgan et al. 2012; Perna and Kurban 2013; Rouse 2004; Sandefur, Meier, and Campbell 2006; Turley, Santos, and Ceja 2007; Zhan and Sherraden 2011). Following is a review of some of the major perspectives and findings.

A human capital or rational-choice model is often used to explain the college enrollment decision (Grodsky and Jones 2007; Perna and Kurban 2013; Rouse 2004). Human capital theory predicts that students make decisions based on their perception of rewards and costs. The assumption is that students decide about college enrollment based on a rational comparison of perceived costs and perceived benefits. Part of making a rational comparison includes perceptions: Even if such perceptions are incorrect, they are still part of an individual's rational comparison.

Rouse (2004) tested the role of perceptions about income expectations on the college enrollment decision. The human-capital model predicted that those who did not enroll in college made the decision based on a rational analysis of the cost-benefit of a college degree, and low-income students had lower college enrollment than high-income students because of differing perceptions about income expectations. However, the evidence did not support this assumption. Low-income and high-income students had

similar expectations regarding the income expectations of college degree attainment. Low-income students were just less able to make college enrollment a reality. They knew the income advantages of attending college, but could not or did not want to make it happen.

Similar lines of inquiry examined other factors related to the decision to enroll in college. Morgan et al. (2012) examined the role of occupational plans in the decision to enroll in college and found that uncertain occupational plans were associated with lower college enrollment. The findings also indicated that inaccurate information about educational requirements for specific jobs was associated with lower college enrollment. The importance of information accuracy was examined by Grodsky and Jones (2007), who advanced that the continued reasons for socioeconomic and race/ethnic inequalities in college enrollment were explained by disparities in knowledge about college costs. Low-income parents overestimated the cost of college, whereas middle-income families whose parents attended college tended to have more accurate knowledge about the cost of education.

Other researchers examined the role of family characteristics in college enrollment stratification. Kim et al. (2013) examined mothers' expectations that their children would attend college. The researchers found the mothers' expectations varied by race and ethnicity, but the difference disappeared when socioeconomic factors were included in the analysis. The conclusion was that economic factors, such as income and parental education, explained most of the difference in parental expectations that their children would attend college.

In the same way, Zhan and Sherraden (2011) attempted to explain racial disparities in college enrollment by examining family financial assets and liabilities. After they controlled for family income and savings, most of the racial differences in college enrollment were eliminated. Zhan and Sherraden suggested race/ethnic economic inequalities in society explained lower college enrollment among minority groups.

Family income and parent educational attainment seemed to continue to be important factors related to college enrollment. Turley et al. (2007) examined the influence of parental education and income on college enrollment across three cohorts in a 30-year time span. The findings indicated family economic and education factors continued to influence the college enrollment of high school seniors. Students whose families had a low income and whose parents did not attend college were less likely to enroll in college, regardless of race/ethnicity or gender.

Perna and Kurban (2013) identified four categories of college-enrollment predictors based on prior research: financial resources, academic preparation and achievement, support from significant others, and knowledge and information about college and financial aid. The availability of need-based aid had a positive effect on college enrollment, with a larger effect for those from low-income families and for students from African-American and Hispanic families than for students from higher-income and white families.

Academic preparation and achievement was one of the areas identified by researchers as influencing the decision to attend college. Not unexpectedly, those who had low academic achievement in high school were less likely to enroll in college. But the students who graduated with low academic preparation and achievement were

stratified and tended to be from groups underrepresented in higher education, such as first-generation college students, low-income families, and those from African American and Hispanic families.

After reviewing the research on factors related to college enrollment and choice, Perna and Kurban (2013) discussed areas in which future research was needed. One of the critical areas identified as needing more research was understanding college enrollment and college choice of nontraditional college students. Perna and Kurban also identified the need for further research examining the role of the high school context in which students made decisions about college. Both of these areas are addressed in the present study.

The participants in this research occupied two social statuses of interest to researchers in higher education: first-generation college students and adult college students. The two statuses often overlap (Choy 2001), yet until recently, few studies examined the unique characteristics of this subset of students: first-generation, adult students (Zwerling 1992).

## FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

First-generation college students are those who are the first in their family of origin to attend college (Billson and Terry 1982). Half of all adult college students are also first-generation college students (Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback, 2002; National Center for Educational Statistics 1995; National Center for Educational Statistics 2002). Yet, much of the research related to first-generation college students tended to assume these students entered college at a traditional age (see Bryan and Simmons 2009; Gofen

2009; London 1989, 1992; Terenzini et al. 1996). The following section summarizes some of the major areas of inquiry on first-generation college students.

*College Access and Achievement*

A growing body of research in higher education focuses on first-generation college students because of the increase in diversity in the study body of institutions of higher education. The research focuses on demographic characteristics, access, academic achievement, and responses to interventions of first-generation college students as compared to non-first college students. Choy (2001) found that the access rate of first generation college students was significantly lower than that of students whose parents attended college. Likewise, Thayer (2000) reviewed the research focused on low-income, first-generation college students. This group was less likely to enroll in college and was less likely to complete college than those who came from middle-income families and who had parents who graduated from college. Additionally, low-income students were less likely to attend college, even when they had high academic abilities.

Horn and Nunez (2000) examined factors that might help increase first-generation student college enrollment. First-generation college students are less likely than are those whose parents graduated from college to enroll in college within two years of high school graduation. Half of first-generation college students are also low-income and more likely to be Hispanic or black. The factors that increase the likelihood of first-generation students enrolling in college include completing higher-level math courses by middle school, parent's participation in college preparation activities, and receiving help in completing applications from high school personnel.

Completing high school level algebra in eighth grade is associated with college enrollment, especially for first-generation college students (Horn and Nunez 2000). But first-generation college students are less likely to take high school level algebra in eighth grade than are students whose parents attended college. Even when first-generation students are considered academically highly qualified, they are less likely to enroll in college than are students whose parents graduated from college.

In another line of inquiry, Terenzini et al. (1996) compared first-generation college students with non-first college students on pre-college characteristics, experiences in college, and academic gains during the first year of college. The findings showed that first-generation college students varied from non-first generation college students on a number of pre-college characteristics and college experiences, and the differences made first-generation college students at greater risk for academic difficulties or non-completion in college. The pre-college characteristics identified as increasing academic risk for first-generation college students included more likely to be from low-income families, to have lower academic skills, to report less engagement during high school, to receive less encouragement from parents, and to have dependent children. One advantage identified was that first-generation college students tended to have more certainty about their academic major, which was associated with higher academic performance and persistence.

Terenzini et al. (1996) also identified several differences in the college experience of first-generation and non-first college students. The differences identified included that first-generation college students were more likely to work full-time, less likely to receive encouragement from friends, and less likely to take humanities and fine arts courses. The

first-generation college students completed fewer college hours during the first year, studied fewer hours, and were more likely to report that they experienced discrimination based on race/ethnicity or gender.

Even with the identified disadvantages, Terenzini et al. (1996) found that both first-generation and non-first college students experienced similar academic gains in math and critical thinking during the first year of college. However, non-first college students had greater gains than first-generation college students had on reading comprehension. This phenomenon might be related to the amount of time studying due to full-time work or parenting responsibilities.

Interventions aimed at addressing issues related to low-income, first-generation college students included addressing issues related to lack of financial resources, lack of knowledge of the educational environment, lack of academic preparation, and lack of family support. The goal of such interventions was to encourage a sense of belongingness, academic competence, and connections with faculty and college staff for first-generation college students.

Similarly, Inman and Mayes (1999) investigated the effect on college success of characteristic differences between first-generation college students and non-first-generation college students. The researchers used a large sample from a community college system. The demographic differences they found between firsts and non-firsts was that first-generation college students were more likely to be older and female. They were also more likely to work more hours that non-firsts. The most striking difference between the two groups was the importance first-generation college students placed on college location and the course offerings.

First-generation college students were more concerned than non-firsts about attending college close to home, with the availability of specific courses, and with the ability to take courses at night (Inman and Mayes 1999). First-generation students were also more likely to stay at the community college until they had earned a degree than were non-first generation students. The differences between first-generation college students and non-first generation students did not seem to affect college success. The authors found no difference between firsts and non-firsts in the number of credits earned and the overall GPA by the end of the first year of college.

*Family Background and Culture*

Another line of inquiry regarding first-generation college students involved family background characteristics and cultural clashes between the family of origin and the culture of higher education. London (1989) described how decisions about education were often dependent upon family dynamics. Attending a degree program at a college could lead to individual autonomy that pulled students away from their own family culture and dynamics. As they continued through their degree program, such rifts could get larger, leading the student to drift further away from the culture of their family of origin. Students reported the drift could lead them to renegotiate their relationships with family and friends, which did not always end happily. Sometimes a student's social mobility caused feelings of disloyalty from the family and friends left behind. The student then might also feel loss and conflict about the changes.

To build on this theme, London (1992) described the benefits gained by first-generation college students as *structural mobility*. Enrolling in a community college was one way of keeping pace with changes in the employment sector, where blue-collar jobs

were decreasing and no longer paying a family wage. London (1992) reasoned that the act of attending higher education for first-generation college students was a form of resocialization into a new status group. Students often felt as though they were leaving behind their old social identities linked to their families in favor of new identities marked by a socially mobile class linked to higher education. Symbols of the new class could include tastes in music, clothing, and food, as well as changing political and social ideologies.

Conversely, first-generation college students found themselves equally out of place on campus, realizing that they needed to adapt their clothing and preferences from their family of origin to fit into campus culture (London 1992). First-generation college students, similar to other students from diverse backgrounds, lived in two different cultural worlds: the culture of their family of origin and the culture in the field of higher education. The dichotomy could cause students to feel as though they were "living in the margins" (London 1992:6) of the two cultures.

Bryan and Simmons (2009) investigated family influences on higher education achievement for first-generation Appalachian college students. Similar to other studies of first-generation college students, the researchers found that the participants had close ties to their families and community. To maintain these ties, the students did not fully assimilate into the college environment, but rather assimilated only on specific issues when necessary, which allowed them to switch back and forth between the culture of the university and their home. The researchers found that the first-generation college students had a difficult time learning and understanding the culture of college life and expressed anxiety about losing a connection with their family by attending college.

Connection to family is not always approached as a potential barrier for first-generation college students. Through interviews with 50 first-generation college students, Gofen (2009) investigated the role of family in breaking the cycle of educational inheritance. Rather than focus on the barriers and challenges families posed to first-generation college students, Gofen focused on how families used non-material resources to invest in their children's education, thereby providing a support system. Findings indicated that family capital was an important factor in the lives of first-generation college students. In the study, family capital was defined as "behavior, emotional processes, and core values" (Gofen 2009:115) related to how families influenced children's educational future. Overall, families of first-generation college students tended to focus on education as ideology, believing that education was one of the top ways a child could succeed in life.

The stories shared by the students in the Gofen (2009) study emphasized their parents' belief in the importance of education. The parents stressed ways in which they could enhance their children's educational lives through cooperation with schools and parental involvement in schools. The three main values expressed by parents of first-generation college students included family solidarity, respect, and ambition. Importantly, families of first-generation college students were not always a constraint to their college-bound children, but rather acted as a resource, albeit in non-material ways. This family role as a resource may well be a major factor in the success of first-generation students who first pursue an education and second persist to graduation.

## FIRST-GENERATION ADULT COLLEGE STUDENTS

Much of the research on first-generation college students either assumed students were traditional age college students or did not explicitly discuss age and work experience as factors related to first-generation college students. Zwerling (1992) focused on the growing number of first-generation, adult students attending college degree programs. As summarized in the previous section, research on first-generation college students highlights the negotiation students have between two cultures, where the student must negotiate living in the culture of the family of origin and the culture of higher education. Zwerling asked whether these cultural tensions also existed for first-generation adult college students. In interviews with two first-generation adult students, findings suggested the cultural pressure of living in two worlds was greatly reduced. Often, adult students were encouraged by friends, family, work associates, their own children, and spouses to attend and persist in college. Zwerling concluded the risk of disapproval from family for adult first-generation students seemed to be less than encountered by younger first-generation students.

In one of the few studies to focus on first-generation adult students as a subset, Byrd and MacDonald (2005) explored college readiness from the perspective of first-generation, older (25 or older) college students. The authors explored issues of college readiness, perspectives of success in college, strengths nontraditional learners bring to college, and preparedness not measured by standardized tests. The study reflected a more positive view of first-generation, adult students by asking their perspectives and focusing on strengths and success. Students reported they believed being an older student benefited them as college students and felt they had advantages in time management, goal

focus, and self-advocacy. The main area in which they reported feeling underprepared was reading comprehension. Students were surprised by their success and continued to struggle to perceive themselves as "good enough" (Byrd and MacDonald 2005:31) to attend college. The authors concluded that age and experience mitigated the effect of lack of knowledge and other preparedness issues found in many studies of first-generation college students.

The mediating role of age and experience for first-generation, adult students was also described by Giancola et al. (2008). The researchers compared perceptions of college between first-generation and non-first generation adult students. Based on previous research with first-generation college students, the researchers expected that first-generation, adult students would report more culture clash in the higher education environment than would non-first generation, adult students. Contrary to their hypothesis, the researchers found no significant differences on perceptions of college between first- and non-first generation adult college students in their sample. Giancola et al. (2008) believed the lack of difference between these two groups of adult students was explained by the greater amount of experience adult students brought to college. Such experiences resulted in personal growth that lessened the impact of generation status for adult students.

In contrast, Reay (2002) surmised that adult, first-generation students must balance risk and safety when making transitions to higher education, particularly with relation to class-based transition. In the narratives of mature first-generation college students, students discussed confusion and ambiguities about seeking a degree while maintaining their working-class identity. Some of the participants identified a concern of

losing themselves in the prospect of finding themselves. Students transition within the educational environment, and they transition from one social class to another.

Reay (2002) identified two different models of integrating educational attainment with a working-class identity. *Individualists* were more likely to give up their identity as working class to re-define themselves as academic. They left the working class identity behind; “They can create a new self unconnected with their former social selves in school and in the family” (Reay 2002:410). The “true self” is then realized through academic attainment and leaving the working class. Individualists tended to choose a more elite college.

*Solidarists* were more likely to maintain their working-class identities while completing a college degree (Reay 2002). These students were less likely to choose an elite college in efforts to minimize the“risk to their identity. Reay found that risk of academic failure led students to choose safety and comfort in the school they chose. The students recognized the potential cost of losing one’s self-identity as working-class when completing a degree.

The main focus of research on first-generation, adult students was culture clash and the potential of age to act as a mediator for challenges in college. However, other research focused more specifically on adult students in higher education.

## ADULT COLLEGE STUDENTS

Adult college students comprise another group that has received a great deal of attention in higher education. The number of adults over the age of 25 has nearly tripled since 1970 (National Center for Educational Statistics 2004). As of 2006, this age group accounted for nearly 38 percent of all students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities

(Stokes 2006), and the numbers were expected to increase. Enrollment of students age 25 and older was projected to increase by 20 percent over the next 10 years (Jones 2013). In the following section, I focus on reviewing the academic literature related to adult college students and identity issues.

Previous research regarding adult undergraduate student social identity focused on role strain and conflict and identity transformations in the academic environment, including early educational experiences and identity. The literature provided a summary of the empirical understanding of adult student educational and social identity issues at the undergraduate level.

*Adult Student Role Strain*

Adult students entering the higher education environment commit significant time and resources to complete a college degree. They make the commitments in addition to their work, family, and community responsibilities. The potential for role conflict for adult students is one area of empirical examination. Home (1997) investigated the factors that contributed to stress and role-strain in adult college students who also maintained family and work responsibilities. The participants included female undergraduate and graduate students. Home (1997) found income was the most significant factor to contribute to stress in the students surveyed. The lower the student income, the more stress the student reported on the surveys. As one might expect, students with children under the age of 13 and those with more children reported higher role strain and stress when combining family with school. Interestingly, perception of role demands was a better predictor of stress than actual role responsibilities. However, perceived support from family and friends helped mediate the experience of stress in the female students.

Using the same data as the previous study, Home (1998) investigated the influences of life situations, institutional support, and perceived demands on role conflict, role overload, and role contagion with work and family demands for female adult college students. The author found that perception of demands was the strongest predictor of all three variables: role conflict, role overload, and role contagion. Institutional supports such as distance education programs helped students adapt to the pressures of multiple roles, while other university supports, such as orientation courses and flexible due dates, did not have an impact on the variables. The author suggested that qualitative research and research with women in non-traditional careers would add to the understanding of role conflict, role overload, and role contagion.

Kirby et al. (2004) looked at the overall impact of attendance in a weekend college program on the work, family, and social lives of adult college students. The findings suggested that support from family members and work associates were important factors in reducing stress for adult students. Using a content analysis from open-ended questions, the authors concluded that attendance in weekend college programs could have positive effects on students' family and work roles. For example, college attendance may contribute to positive role-modeling for family members. Increased problem-solving and time-management skills learned in college could also contribute positively to family and work roles. In addition to the impact of college attendance on students' family and work lives, other researchers looked at the impact of college on student identity.

*Adult Student Identity within the College Environment*

The concept of identity within educational institutions is of interest to disciplinarily diverse social science researchers. Previous researchers in education and sociology investigated adult student college students and identity from various perspectives. The following summarizes some of these research studies.

Kasworm (2005) explored cultural and social identity of adult students as it related to their role within the classroom and identified positional and relational identities in adult students concerning academic status. Within the college environment, positional identity included interactions within the environment and the students' understanding of their place within the college community. The positional identities included social norms for college involvement, age-related beliefs about academic competence, and beliefs about the ideal college student, and were related to how adult students judged themselves as college students. The relational identity part of student identity was based in the social interactions within the college environment and included relationships with faculty, relationships with younger students, and relationships with other adult students. Kasworm focused on the impact of age on student identity, with very little attention to other social factors.

Using similar concepts, Kasworm (2010) investigated the student identity of adult students (at least 30 years or older) at a research university, focusing specifically on exploring learning engagement in the classroom and the students' perceptions of involvement in the college. Two major themes of positional identity within the research university were gaining acceptance within the college environment and being successful in the classroom. Gaining acceptance was related to the age difference from other

students in the classroom, while being successful was related to perceived academic weaknesses in a highly competitive environment.

To overcome concerns about being successful in the academic environment, students discussed engaging in goal-oriented, purposeful learner behavior and persistence such as taking remedial courses at a community college, repeating earlier coursework, and using high school textbooks to relearn basic academic concepts (Kasworm 2010). The major theme identified as important to relational identity was the adult-student/faculty relationship. In general, adult students based their relational identities on their interactions with faculty and faculty judgments. The relationship faculty had with adult students tended to progress from respect of adult students to collegial relationships with adult students, which were not always offered to traditional age students.

Babineau and Packard (2006) explored the identity processes used by adult students enrolled in degree programs at community colleges and determined four possible selves that distinguished adult students when they returned to or began college. The four possible selves included reclaiming past selves, rejecting past selves for a newly constructed self, constructing a new self, and expanding a current self. Babineau and Packard (2006) found that the possible selves varied, based on the participant's previous college experience. Students who had previously attended college were more likely to form an identity that was reclaiming past selves or rejecting past selves for a newly constructed self than were students who had not previously attended college.

The studies discussed above investigated adult student identity issues within the college environment, but did not specifically investigate educational identities. Moore (2006) conducted life-history interviews in Finland with students who entered higher

education for the first time as adults. To analyze changes in educational identities using a symbolic interaction approach, educational identity was defined as "a social structure that is located in the individual and is based on the meanings formed in the context of education" (Moore 2006:150).

Educational identities are understood as constructed and reconstructed through interactions within social institutions, primarily educational institutions (Moore 2006). The individual aspect of educational identity includes a sense of whom one is through the meaning attached to subjective experiences within educational institutions. The experience of social position within educational institutions is the social aspect of educational identity. The analysis of narratives by adult students is limited to aspects of identity related to education and learning. Similar to adult students in the United States, adult students in Finland tended to come from families with lower education levels and lower socio-economic status. All the participants in Moore study were first-generation college students.

Moore (2006) focused analysis of the life-history narratives on the process of becoming a university student and educational identity transformations within higher education institutions. The reasons students did not attend university earlier in life was discussed briefly as structural, financial, or geographical limitations, with few details. Rather, the analysis focused on what led the students to attend college as adults and the educational identity transformations that resulted. Moore found that adult students were motivated to enroll in college because of unrewarding work that left them feeling unsatisfied. Additionally, the students were influenced by significant others who helped change their thinking about enrolling in college.

Some of these significant others had university degrees. The association with such people changed the way the adults thought about their own educational possibilities (Moore 2006). The female students discussed feelings of insecurity about their academic abilities because of early educational experiences; however, the male students did not report the same feeling. Students reported increased self-concept and more confidence as a result of attending college. Moore concluded that ideas related to individuals' educational identity formed in youth were not fixed and could be transformed through experiences later in life. Education experiences later in life transformed how students saw themselves, how they perceived others saw them, and their position in social space through upward mobility.

## EARLY EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND IDENTITY

A few researchers investigated the role of early educational experiences on social and educational identities. Luttrell (1996) posited that schools were a major site where identity was formed and understood and was concerned "with how schools encourage some aspects of the self more than others" (94). Her emphasis was on the paradoxes in the development in the self, "the build in tension between self-assertion and recognition" (Luttrell 1996:95). Drawing on the narratives of women enrolled in an adult literacy program, the objective was to understand how the women defined the self as "somebody" and how they explained "who succeeds, who fails, and why" (Luttrell 1996:97). Luttrell referred to the stories as "narrative urgency" as women told

> [C]autionary tales about the risks inherent in childhood longings, and sometimes told with a sense of irony about the gap between dreams and reality, the women's stories highlighted formative experiences through which they came to understand

and defend their selves in American society, where some people count and others don't. (Luttrell 1996:97)

Luttrell discussed *split images* women used to define themselves in contrast with others. Split images involved who was and who was not "somebody," based on definitions within specific contexts, such as schools, by those with power in those contexts, such as teachers.

The ideas shaped Luttrell's research on how schools have important implications in the development of the self. In her analysis of women's narratives, Luttrell (1996) found that women felt the need to explain why they had not been socially upwardly mobile. The accounts reflected the tension between "self-assertion and recognition" (Luttrell 1996:107). Women either rejected early schooling experiences or doubted the ability of school to help them become socially mobile, so Luttrell asked why they decided to return to school to better themselves. Luttrell summarized her findings:

> All the women's accounts illustrate the importance of developing other selves outside the world of success–selves that are worthwhile regardless of schooling or job; selves that enjoy, depend upon, and are affiliated with others. In both sets of accounts, the women stress their "social selves," that part of the self that strives to satisfy the expectations and needs of others, is capable of empathy, and seeks interaction. This part of the self is what women are usually praised for; it is what women learn makes them appealing. Thus, it should be no surprise that the women's accounts stress this aspect. (Luttrell 1996:107)

Luttrell (1997) expanded on these ideas in her book, *Schoolsmart and Motherwise: Working-Class Women's Identity and Schooling*. Through interviews with nearly 200 women, Luttrell analyzed the life stories of women who returned to school at two different adult literacy programs. The purpose of her research was to understand the ways the women described their early educational experiences to demonstrate the varied ways the experiences influenced the women's self-image and identity. In particular,

Luttrell was interested in how women "learned about themselves and their place in American society, and revealed the personal costs of these lessons" (Luttrell 1996:3). Luttrell sought to more fully develop how women interpreted and understood intersections of gender, race, and class, thereby expanding and contributing to cultural reproduction and production theories of inequality.

Early educational experiences had a formative and lasting effect on women's definition of themselves as learners (Luttrell 1997). One of the major ways early experiences influenced such perceptions was through which traits or characteristics were recognized as valuable in schools and society. The stories demonstrated women's understanding of themselves and others as "good" schoolgirls and "bad" schoolgirls (Luttrell 1997:9) and their ideas about legitimate and illegitimate knowledge. Those traits associated with economically advantaged girls were seen as "intelligent" or "valuable" (Luttrell 1997:114) by teachers. Those who had the specific traits possessed a type of cultural capital believed to justify their superior position within the classroom. Such students were referred to as teacher's pets. One strategy used to cope with the practices was to adopt the logic of the school and remained silent and invisible. The other strategy was to refuse school logic and adopt an attitude of resistance to authority.

Luttrell found that the early educational experiences described by the women did shape their social identity; "Their stories drew upon a world of women–teachers, mothers, daughters–who were judged and who judged themselves according to how successfully they met the demands of school" (Luttrell 1997:115). Because such early experiences defined the women, those who were not successful in school blamed themselves—their personal characteristics, abilities, and so on—for their school failure.

However, the identities were not static, but in flux. Luttrell suggested the act of returning to school as adults might in fact be an act of resistance to the educational identities formed in early schooling experiences. The students did not fully accept the myth of meritocracy, but rather returned to school to reclaim the parts of themselves denied earlier. “Having been encouraged to stifle the development of some aspects of themselves for the sake of others, these women returned to school to regain the visibility, voices, and autonomy denied them” (Luttrell 1997:117).

Luttrell (1996; 1997) focused on the role of early educational experiences in the social identities of economically disadvantaged women, including identities related to education and other aspects of the self. Other researchers focused specifically on how early educational experiences affected educational identities. Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) defined educational identity as one’s disposition to learning, which includes a learner’s perceptions and approaches to learning. Applying a symbolic interaction approach, dispositions to learning emerge from the practice of learning, the meaning attached to learning, the subjective interpretation of the usefulness of learning, and actions related to learning. Educational identities allow individuals to consider connections with the wider social context in which learners are located, the subjective meanings attached to learning, and transformations over time. Bloomer and Hodkinson (2002) maintained that educational identity could not be understood outside of the social and cultural context of the learner’s life, positing that educational identities transformed over time.

Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) analyzed the learning careers of students ages 15 to 19 in the United Kingdom. Based on their analysis of interviews with the students, the

conclusion was, “the courses which lives and learning careers took were never simply the products of rationally determined choice” (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000:593). Rather, the authors maintained that learning careers and educational identity must be understood within the social context of young people’s life experiences. Neglecting the situational aspect of learning limits the ability to fully understand educational identities and the choices students make. Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) concluded that using a longitudinal view of learning dispositions is necessary to fully understand transformations over the lifespan. They believed that using case studies of individual stories would enable viewing the uniqueness of educational identity transformations within the broader social context.

Other researchers investigated the influence of early educational experiences on educational identity formation and transformation in adult students. Webb (2001) studied the formation and transformation of educational identities through the analysis of interviews and questionnaires of adult students in their first year at a university in England. The participants in the study left public schooling with no intention of continuing education. Later in life, the students entered higher education.

Webb (2001) focused on how educational identities affected the decision-making processes related to education and identified three narratives related to educational identities formed during previous educational experiences: access denied, untapped potential, and wasted potential. Students who believed higher education was not an option for them at the time they left schooling expressed the “access denied” educational identity. The students did not attribute their lack of progression to higher education as their own deficit, but rather as coming from institutional practices and articulated by

teachers and parents. They believed they were pushed toward working-class jobs, "women's work," or marriage and family.

Students with the "untapped potential" educational identity expressed problems in school due to lack of confidence, underperformance, and problems with teachers, parents, or peers and tended to attribute failure in school to their own deficiencies (Webb, 2001). The third group was identified as having an educational identity labeled "wasted potential." This group of students had experienced some success in school, but then attributed their lack of educational progression to their own rejection of education and refusal to do what others expected of them in school. Webb (2001) concluded the three educational narratives played a prominent role in students' educational decision-making. The educational narratives interacted with experiences with employment and families in unique ways, demonstrating that institutional, dispositional, and situational factors interacted in complex ways.

The role of early educational experiences on educational identities was also explored with adults who were not currently engaged in education. Birch (2013) used life-history narratives with adults in the United Kingdom to gather data about learning cultures, educational identities, and the decision to engage in learning. The adults in her study left formal education with few or no qualifications and had not engaged in formal education since then. She interviewed six men and six women about their educational identity, early educational experiences, and views of learning.

Early educational experiences such as high school included themes of disengagement from learning, beliefs that formal learning in high school lacked meaningfulness, instances of bullying, and low teacher expectations. To assess

educational identities, Birch (2013) developed five categories of educational identity and asked participants to select from one of the five. The five categories included (1) “I wasn’t expected to do well in school,” (2) “I didn’t like school,” (3) “I could have done better,” (4) “Other things were more important at the time,” and (5) “None of the options” (Birch 2013:53). Many participants chose two or more of the options, reflecting the complexity of educational identities.

Based on the analysis, Birch (2013) concluded educational identities were influenced by experiences in educational institutions, the identities persisted into adulthood, and educational identities influenced later decisions about engaging in education. Educational identities developed in high school had “a lasting effect on their disposition to learn” (Birch 2013:54). Further, a “deficit perspective” of those who did not engage in learning “discounts the complex reasons underlying their reluctance to re-engage” (Birch 2013:54) in learning.

## SUMMARY

Earning a college degree directly after high school offers numerous advantages. In spite of the advantages and the variety of programs designed to expand access to and increase preparation for college, many high school graduates do not go on to enroll. Students from low-income families and those whose parents did not graduate from college are less likely to enroll in college than are students from higher-income families who have at least one parent with a college degree. These factors work to (re)produce economic and social inequality in society. The present research was an investigation of how educational identity formed and transformed within educational institutions over the lifespan, and how the identities were related to decisions about education.

This chapter contained a review of the theoretical perspectives that provided the framework for this dissertation. The relevant literature on college enrollment stratification, first-generation college students, adult college students, and educational identities was summarized in the chapter. Although significant overlap is present among students who are first-generation and adult students, this specific group has received little empirical attention. As found in the few published studies on the topic, some issues relevant to first-generation students as a whole may be less significant for those who have adult status. Additional issues may be related to adult college student status that do not significantly affect first-generation college students. The present research provided additional insight in this area.

The research in the next section related to the exploration of identity transformations in the college environment. The educational context of higher education affects the identity of adult students enrolled in college. Finally, the research related to the influence of early educational experiences on social and educational identities was summarized. This dissertation built on the reviewed research by examining how educational identity was formed and transformed within educational institutions over the lifespan, and how these identities were related to decisions about education. The relationship between social context, educational identities, and decision-making can help inform models designed to explain college enrollment stratification. The next chapter details the methodology chosen for this dissertation.

# CHAPTER III:

# METHODOLOGY

This research was an examination of how educational identities were formed and transformed within educational institutions over the lifespan and how the identities related to decisions about education. The research described and explained the social construction of educational identities from the standpoint of the participants. The social phenomena of interest included how social class was reproduced within educational institutions and how educational identities were shaped through social interactions within the specific social setting of educational institutions.

This research utilized a life-history approach to explore how first-generation, adult students enrolled in their first year of college constructed educational identities. Because educational identities are dynamic, early educational experiences can affirm or contradict students' beliefs about themselves, and adult students may need to reconcile previous educational identities with their desire to return to school to pursue a college degree. Educational identities additionally may be shaped by intersections of age, social class, race, and gender.

I believe a deeper understanding of how early educational experiences influence students' beliefs about their educational aptitudes and their decisions about additional education over the lifespan will allow sociologists and educators to more fully understand the role of social contexts of educational institutions in the formation and transformations

of educational identities, as well as how such identities contribute to inequality in educational attainment. This research was guided by the following three research questions:

(1) What is the role of early educational experiences in shaping students' educational identities? How do these early experiences affect decisions about attending college?

(2) What life experiences or changes in the field create a shift in dispositions that lead to enrollment in a college degree program later in life?

(3) How do students (re)align the educational identities developed in early educational experiences with their new role as college student? How does the culture of higher education support or detract from the development of positive educational identities?

Description of the methodology chosen for this research appears in this chapter. First, I describe the theoretical rationale for the research design. Next, I describe the research participants, provide an overview of the research design, explain the data collection methods, and summarize the process used to analyze and synthesize the data. Finally, I discuss ethical considerations, issues of trustworthiness, and challenges of the study.

## THEORETICAL RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH DESIGN

As explained in Chapter I, a critical feminist qualitative research design provided the theoretical foundation to explore the educational experiences and identities of first-generation, adult students. Critical research paradigms focus on how power, control, and ideology are involved in understanding social reality, while feminist research paradigms aim to uncover parts of the human experience that may be hidden or subjugated under traditional or positivist research paradigms (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). Critical research methodology has the potential to transform the research process away from the

researcher as sole power and authority to a collaboration of knowledge construction between the researcher and the participants (Greenwood and Levin 2008; Miskovic and Hoop 2006). Using critical research is consistent with the goals of research as an applied function. One of the basic principles of critical research is that researchers must collaborate to solve real-world problems by bridging local knowledge and professional knowledge (Greenwood and Levin 2008). Critical research is consistent with my theoretical perspective and with the ideals of adult learning in general.

Critical theorists use their work as a way of critiquing society, and therefore research is a tool of social critique (Kincheloe and McLaren 2008). In this way, critical theorists see research participants as partners in the research process. Some of the issues that can be raised include

- How do issues of power and justice interact to form a social system (including educational, family, and work systems)?
- What prevents individuals from having control over their lives?
- Who is in control of the production and transmission of knowledge, including what meaning we attach to knowledge production and holders?
- How do we analyze information in relation to other information (nothing is separate from interaction)?
- How are experiences vulnerable to ideology? and
- Does knowledge in the classroom clash with knowledge outside (Kincheloe and McLaren 2008)?

In critical sociological work, the public sphere is the starting point for critiquing and transforming oppressive and inequitable conditions in society. Taking a critical approach in this research shed light on the inequalities within educational institutions that perpetuate the construction of disadvantageous educational identities.

The qualitative research design in this study was in-depth, life-history interviews with first-generation, adult college students. According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006), the interview is a meaning-making process between the researcher and the interviewee, where the goal is to lessen the division between these roles and collaborate in the knowledge creation process. The overall goal of choosing in-depth interviews was to gain descriptive and explanatory data on a specific topic in a single interview.

In-depth interviews allowed the researcher to obtain knowledge from the participants, including complex information that resulted in rich data for later analysis and interpretation (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). In-depth interviews were useful to understanding the social realities of those marginalized from society and have been used extensively in feminist and critical methodologies. In-depth interviews are useful in "accessing subjugated voices and getting at subjugated knowledge" because "those who have been marginalized in society, such as women, people of color, homosexuals, and the poor, may have hidden experiences and knowledge that have been excluded from our understanding of social reality" (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006:123).

A life-history approach (Atkinson 1998) was used in this research to highlight the important experiences and turning points in the educational lives of the students. In a similar study of educational identities of adult students in Finland, Moore (2006) professed that life history interviews were the best way to analyze the social and individual changes occurring within historical, local, and social contexts. The life stories included individual experiences within educational institutions and shared cultural ideas about education and becoming a college student. Birch (2013) also used life-history narratives to gather data about learning cultures, educational identities, and the decision

to engage in learning in the United Kingdom. This particular approach allowed the analysis of how earlier experiences influenced later ways of thinking and behaving.

According to Atkinson (1998), the life-history interview is an important method "in trying to understand others' positions in life or description of themselves and their relation to others, to let their voices be heard, to let them speak for and about themselves first." He believed the life-history interview provided the best way "to know the unique experience and perspective of the individual" (Atkinson 1998:5).

Luttrell (1997) analyzed the life stories of women enrolled in an adult literacy program. She developed the idea of "storied selves" (8) to describe how women used stories about themselves and past events to process and understand their social identities. The definitions included an understanding of how school provided the means for them to "become somebody." Storied selves were an illuminating way to understand how images of the self could "take hold in varied ways, with varied force, and with varied costs attached for individuals" (Luttrell 1997:118). The variations created a complex self that included elements of class, race, and gender dynamics. In this way, the act of telling stories of one's self could be a political act to revisit and reinterpret stories and find similarities between our own stories and the stories of others.

> Through the women's storytelling, we learn that life stories are about self-understandings and social identities; that these life stories are shaped by multiple structures of domination; and that life stories are shaped by the desire for mutual recognition. . .that telling life stories can provide an impetus and direction for new ways of being and acting in the world. (Luttrell 1997:119)

One distinguishing factor in life-history approaches is the ability for participants to provide a first-person account of their own experiences in their own words. Researchers used the life-history interview to examine how people formed understandings of their self and to construct meanings about their lives. The life-history

approach illuminated the experiences of one person while at the same time highlighting how the individual interacted within the context of society as a whole. The life-history interview also allowed the storyteller "to tell their stories from the vantage point that allows them to see their life as a whole" (Luttrell 1997:5) as it fit together with other experiences. It became a process of understanding the teller's construction of his or her reality.

The prominence of the storyteller's voice in the life-history approach is consistent with critical and feminist research paradigms. As discussed in Chapter 2, feminist and critical methodologies provided a framework to critique dominant ideologies related to educational achievement and attainment. The knowledge gained from lived experiences of first-generation, adult students allowed critique of the knowledge claims related to educational achievement and attainment and the promotion of social change.

## RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Participants for this study were recruited from the community college where I was employed as an administrator at the time of the study. The research participants were enrolled full- or part-time in the first year of an associate degree program at an urban, multi-campus, Midwestern community college. The college was the largest community college and the third largest college in the state where it was located.

A stratified, purposeful sample of research participants was used to select individuals with particular characteristics related to the research question and to provide a means for comparison (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). The characteristics all participants had in common were related to the research questions. None of the participants attended college directly after high school. They were all experiencing college for the first time at

an age of 30-59 and were considered low-income, based on receiving financial aid based on need. Attempts were made to include participants who varied by race and gender.

Recruitment of research participants included flyers handed out in class by instructors and posted around the campus. Participants were recruited through the offices of services designed for adult or first-generation college students. Other college staff, such as tutors, were informed of the research and participant qualifications and referred additional participants. I knew none of the participants prior to the interview. Eligible participants met the following criteria: (a) enrolled in their first year of college; (b) the first person in their family of origin to attend college; (c) receiving financial aid based on need; and (d) between the ages of 30 and 59. The criteria were used to select participants who were low-income, adult, first-generation college students. This experience was the first college enrollment for all the participants. The age range of 30-59 was used to narrow cohort effects based on age and to ensure that participants had significant time and experiences outside of the context of educational environments. In a study of learning engagement of adult students, Kasworm (2010) also used the age of 30 as the lower-range of age for the participants.

A total of 15 research participants were interviewed. Table 1 has a summary of participant demographics. The participants varied by gender, race/ethnicity, previous occupation, and marital status. Ten of the participants were female and five were male. The ages of the participants ranged from 30 to 53. Nine participants identified as white, three identified as Hispanic, one identified as African American, one identified as Native American, and one identified as Bi-racial (African American/white). Ten participants

were single, four were married, and one was divorced. Most of the participants were currently unemployed or disabled and enrolled in college full-time.

Table 1. Participant Self-Described Demographics

| Participant Pseudonym | Gender | Age | Ethnicity/ Race | Marital Status | Previous Occupation | Current Occupation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Daniel | Male | 48 | White | Single | Plumber | Unemployed/ FT Student |
| Alex | Male | 37 | White | Married | Management | Unemployed/ FT Student |
| Diane | Female | 48 | Native American | Single | Nurse's Aide | Disabled/ FT Student |
| Cassie | Female | 32 | White | Single/ Engaged | Factory Worker | Disabled/ FT Student |
| Marcy | Female | 37 | White | Single | Computer Analyst | Unemployed/ FT Student |
| Sally | Female | 35 | White | Single | Retail Clerk | Work Study/ FT Student |
| Amy | Female | 33 | White | Married | Call Center | Unemployed/ FT Student |
| Rachel | Female | 36 | Hispanic | Single | Business Owner | Parent/ PT Student |
| Joseph | Male | 38 | White | Single | General Laborer | Unemployed/ FT Student |
| Robert | Male | 41 | African American | Single | Hospital Orderly | Unemployed/ FT Student |
| Anna | Female | 30 | Hispanic | Married | Medical Assistant | Unemployed/ FT Student |
| Eva | Female | 39 | Hispanic | Single | Insurance Representative | Unemployed/ FT Student |
| Cheryl | Female | 53 | White | Married | Clerical | Clerical/ FT Student |
| Kimberly | Female | 51 | White | Divorced | Secretary | Office Mgr/ FT Student |
| Mark | Male | 41 | Bi-racial; African American/White | Single | Military | Disabled/ PT Student |

*Note.* $N = 15$. FT = Full time; PT = Part time

Working with small samples is common in qualitative research, because the goal is to provide an in-depth understanding of social processes and meanings rather than to make broad generalizations (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). In this research, my goal was to understand how first-generation, adult students interpreted and made meaning of their

early educational experiences and decisions within the context of returning to an academic environment as adults. The use of in-depth, life-history interviews with 15 participants supported this undertaking. An overview of my research design is in the next section.

## RESEARCH DESIGN OVERVIEW

Prior to undertaking the collection of data for this study, I reviewed and summarized theoretical perspectives, available research, and methodologies that helped me develop research questions and a methodological rationale and plan. The literature review centered on research about adult and non-traditional college students, particularly studies that examined student identities or meaning making. After reviewing the literature, I learned I also needed to examine research related to first-generation college students. Based on the theoretical perspectives that guided my research and the previous literature, I determined that a qualitative life-history approach was the methodology that would best address my research questions.

Based on the examination of theoretical perspectives, applicable research, and chosen methodology, I developed and defended the research proposal. After the research proposal defense, I acquired approval to complete the research from the IRB. The IRB approval application included a summary of the research purpose and procedures. I outlined the procedures used to recruit research participants, the interview protocol, and the steps taken to ensure confidentiality, gain informed consent, and minimize risk to participants.

Research participants were recruited through the community college where I worked as an administrator at the time of the study. I did not know any of the participants

prior to the interview. Flyers outlining the research were developed and distributed to instructors, who passed the information on to students who might be interested in participating. Some research participants contacted me by phone or e-mail based, on the information on the flyer. Instructors, college tutors, and college staff who worked with adult students referred other participants to me after the student expressed interest in participating. The first contact with potential participants was on the phone or through e-mail, where I described the research questions and interview process. Those who agreed to participate scheduled a time to meet for the interview.

Each interview took place in an office or conference room at the campus where the student attended classes. After a brief review of the research purpose and interview process, I reviewed the informed consent form with the participant (see Appendix A). I answered any questions they had, and they signed the informed consent forms. The interview protocol contained questions in four different areas: memories of schooling from early childhood to adolescence, memories of the decision not to attend college, social forces that led to college enrollment, and current experiences in the college environment. Demographic information was collected using a short questionnaire the participants completed at the end of the interview.

The interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy. The interview responses were analyzed individually and then as a group. The process of analyzing the interviews is described in detail later in this chapter. After the analysis of the interviews, additional research was reviewed based on themes that emerged from the interviews. The main additional research investigated included school engagement, peer relationships,

and impacts of student victimization on academic achievement. The next section details my data collection methods.

## DATA COLLECTION METHODS

First-generation, adult college students who were enrolled in their first year of community college were recruited to complete interviews related to the research questions. Prior to interviewing research participants, I completed two pilot interviews using the interview protocol in this study. After the pilot interviews, I reviewed the questions with the pilot participants, looking for areas that might have been unclear or potentially confusing. No major revisions to the interview schedule were necessary, based on the pilot interviews.

Fifteen students were interviewed about their educational experiences across the lifespan. These semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes each, were digitally recorded, and were transcribed verbatim. The interviews provided the data for the findings in this study.

Unlike quantitative research, which interprets significance based on numerical or statistical analysis, qualitative research establishes significance through the interpretation of the importance, meaningfulness, and potential usefulness of the findings (Bloomberg and Volpe 2008). Working with small samples is common in qualitative research, because the goal is to provide an in-depth understanding of social processes and meanings rather than to make broad generalizations (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). In this research, my goal was to understand how first-generation adult students interpreted and made meaning of their early educational experiences and decisions within the context

of returning to an academic environment as adults. The use of in-depth interviews enabled the undertaking.

Storytelling is an important process of human communication by enabling us to make meaning of our experiences and communicate with others those experiences and their meanings. Through storytelling, we are able to process experiences, reflect on them, and contextualize events in our lives. Atkinson (1998) posited that the life-history narrative is an important experience for both the researcher who is gathering data and the persons telling their stories. The process allows the storyteller to make sense of important experiences, influences, and life lessons. Stories are our way of organizing, interpreting, and creating meaning from our experiences while maintaining a sense of continuity through it all" (Atkinson 1998:7). The life-history narrative can highlight how the storyteller "uses adaptive strategies to reconcile and resolve conflicts of the past" (Atkinson 1998:7). Therefore, the most suitable way to analyze the negotiation of educational identities is through life history research or life story interviews (Atkinson 1998).

A life-history approach allows a researcher to highlight the turning points in the lives of individuals. Using the life-history approach addressed the primary questions of this study: the formation and transformation of educational identities within educational institutions and the social forces that pushed individuals to enroll in college later in life. One of the primary benefits of life-history research is it allowed the understanding of developmental processes. Atkinson (1998) claimed the narratives produced through the life-history interviews were the best way for a researcher to understand a person's life experiences and interpretations of events and feelings.

Life-history interviews took place with individuals who had entered a college degree program as an adult, were between the ages of 30 and 59, were first-generation college students, and received financial aid based on need. The life story interviews were semi-structured, providing the researcher with latitude to follow up on emerging issues and themes not apparent prior to the interview. Although primary questions guided the interviews, the focus was on probing the respondents' answers for deeper and more extensive understanding.

After identifying a line of inquiry (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006) an interview guide for the semi-structured interviews was developed (see Appendix B). The interview guide identified key issues relevant to this research while allowing the participants some freedom to discuss issues relevant to them. In this research, the emphasis and scope of the life-history interview evolved around early experiences in educational institutions, identity development within those institutions, choices made about education, and educational identity transformations within the social context of educational institutions. Each interview was transcribed verbatim within two to three days of its completion. The next section contains a summary of the analysis and a synthesis of data collected through the interviews.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS

As with the methodology, analysis and interpretation of the data were informed by a critical theoretical perspective. During the process of data collection and simultaneous analysis, maintaining a stance of reflexivity was important. Reflexivity was the process through which the researcher examined her own experiences and assumptions during the research process. Some experiences were similar to those relayed by

participants, while other experiences were different. Reflexivity required me to be mindful to both similarities and differences to my own experiences during the interpretation of the data (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006).

Patton (2002) further clarified the process of reflexivity by articulating a "triangulated reflexive inquiry" (p.495) that involved self-reflexivity, reflexivity about the participants, and reflexivity about those who read the research. I examined by own background in educational institutions throughout the process to reflect on my own positionality. As a first-generation college student who attended college at a traditional age, I had some similar experiences to the participants when they related early educational experiences in elementary and high school. Despite mediocre grades and poor engagement in high school, I attended a state university, under open admissions policies and using federal Pell grants, directly after graduating high school. Therefore, my work experience during adulthood was very different from that of the participants. However, many of the changes in educational identities experienced by the participants were similar to my own transformations while attending college. Additionally, my experiences as a student services counselor and instructor of adult students in college settings influenced my initial and continued interest in the topics explored in this research.

Data analysis began during the data collection process. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) described this form of analysis as an iterative process in which the data collection and analysis proceed simultaneously. After each interview, I took notes that summarized some of the main themes I noticed. This process of *memoing* (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006) allowed me to reflect on themes that supported and contradicted assumptions made

prior to the data collection. Memoing also allowed me to reflect on my positionality during the data collection and analysis process. Some themes were apparent within 4-5 interviews, while others took shape later, after completing more interviews and reading and re-reading transcripts.

After all the interviews were completed, I performed a holistic data exploration and reduction (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). I began with the first research question as a guide and read each transcript, looking for related themes, ideas, and concepts. Passages in the narratives that spoke to the research question were highlighted using color codes, and written notes summarized main points. Some of the notes later became codes used in the final coding process. The data exploration and reduction process was repeated for each research question.

Coding of the transcripts and data happened throughout the process, but was refined during and after data exploration and reduction. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) explained that coding included locating sections of the narratives that were important and spoke to the research questions. These sections were then coded using descriptive categories. The data analysis was inductive because no pre-defined codes were determined prior to the analysis process.

Some of the codes were literal codes because students often used some of the same terminology (e.g., “just try”) to describe a thoughts or behaviors, while other codes were more interpretive. Interpretive coding required using my own insight to determine the overall theme within the text. For example, as students discussed their early educational experiences, they often had different types of stories (e.g., bullying, undiagnosed learning disabilities). As I reflected on the social context of these stories, I

was able to see that school neglect was a similar contextual factor providing the background for the experiences. After all the coding was complete, I again looked for overlap between codes and instances where the narratives spoke to more than one code at the same time.

To organize the coded data across all 15 narratives, I created tables based on the conceptual framework and research questions. The tables helped me organize the similarities among narratives and look for overall patterns among concepts. The tables allowed me to visualize patterns among concepts, such as participants' schooling experiences and descriptions of themselves as learners. I also used the patterns to look at and reflect on *negative cases* (Bloomberg and Volpe 2008) in which participants' stories diverged from the patterns found in the other narratives.

The process of analysis included pulling apart the data; whereas, synthesis involved putting the information back together to tell a holistic story (Bloomberg and Volpe 2008). To pull the observations together, I completed additional memoing based on the tables. The memos included relevant quotes from the narratives that illustrated main points. I looked across all the findings to see the over-arching story they told. The memos eventually made up the findings presented in next chapters.

To complete the analysis and synthesis, I reviewed the theoretical perspectives and literature reviews already completed. Based on the findings, I reviewed additional literature on school engagement and social class, peer victimization, and the influence of peer relationships on academic engagement. This information was incorporated into the presentation of the findings and the discussion.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

When conducting research with people, considering potential risks to those who participate is important (Bloomberg and Volpe 2008). I took several precautions during the research process to minimize risks to the research participants. Prior to recruiting participants, I obtained approval for my research project from the IRB (Institutional Review Board). The goal of the IRB is to protect human subjects in research. All research participants were fully informed about the goals of the research and the interview process. I explained the informed consent form to each participant and ensured each participant signed the consent before beginning the interview.

The issue of power difference between the participants as students and me as researcher and administrator was a concern (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). I wanted to assure participants that their participation was completely voluntary. None of the participants were former or current students in classes I taught, and none were known to me in any other way prior to the interview. Prior to the interview, I explained to participants that they did not have to answer any question they found uncomfortable and they could stop the entire interview at any time. None of the participants indicated they did not want to answer a question, nor did anyone stop the interview before its completion.

Several precautions were taken to ensure participant confidentiality. Each participant was assigned a number, which was used to label the demographic questionnaires and the interview recordings, rather than using the participant's name. The key that matched each name with assigned number was kept securely on a password-protected computer in my home office, and destroyed after the completion of the research

process. The identities of participants were disguised by using pseudonyms during the coding process and when writing the findings and discussion. Specific names of individuals, schools, colleges, and places mentioned during the interviews were disguised or deleted in any quotations that became part of the final research document.

Although an important aspect of this research was the personal stories of participants, the written findings were the patterns that emerged from the stories. Focusing on the patterns that emerged and the similarities in the participants' stories enhanced confidentiality. Someone familiar with one of the participants could foreseeably recognize that participant if the research was reported in a verbatim fashion, giving personal and distinguishing accounts; however, because the research was reported so the commonalties of the participants became the focus, identification of participants was made difficult. Although the data were gathered using individual in-depth interviews, the results were reported at the aggregate level, adding to the participants' confidentiality.

## TRUSTWORTHINESS

The trustworthiness of a qualitative study is based on different criteria than those used in quantitative research, although terminology might be similar (Bloomberg and Volpe 2008). In this research, I used the terminology of *validity* and *reliability* to describe trustworthiness. To check for validity and reliability of the interpretation, I used the suggestions laid out by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006). The overall test for validity is how well the findings stand up against previous knowledge claims. In addition to this overall question to test validity, I used the three-part model developed by Kvale (cited in Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). This model called for the researcher to judge validity

based on validity as craftsmanship, communicative validity, and pragmatic validity (Kvale, as cited in Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006).

Validity of craftsmanship includes aspects of credibility of the researcher and the research. One of the ways I addressed the issue was to include negative cases in the analysis of the data. Communicative validity includes comparing interpretations with those of other researchers and professionals who studied similar phenomena. One way I addressed communicative validity was to compare my findings with studies that examined similar problems. I also discussed the findings with former adult, first-generation college students and with those who worked with this population in a college setting. Pragmatic validity involves how useful the findings were in eliciting social action. From a critical and feminist perspective, the focus was on actions related to social justice. The implications for social change are discussed in the final chapter.

To check for reliability in qualitative research, the researcher should determine how well the data adds up, or whether it has internal consistency (Hesse-Biber 2006). The similarities within the participants' unique stories demonstrated consistency, as well as the consistency of the stories with other similar research.

According to the principles of critical research, validity, credibility, and reliability are measured by the usefulness of the knowledge to those who use it and the outcomes the knowledge produces. In critical research, generalization means that knowledge is context bound. Therefore, understanding the context in which knowledge is created and how the transfer of knowledge to new contexts changes the knowledge is necessary. This calls for reflection on knowledge application between contexts (Greenwood and Levin 2008).

The significance of qualitative findings is judged by their *substantive significance* rather than statistical significance. Substantive significance includes consistency in findings and across other studies, ability to increase the understanding of the phenomenon, and usefulness in building theory or application to practice and policy (Bloomberg and Volpe 2008).

## METHODOLOGY CHALLENGES

Two major challenges were identified during the process of completing this study. The first was the ability to make broad generalizations about the findings. Qualitative research is not designed to make broad generalizations about a population. Unlike quantitative research, which interprets significance based on numeral or statistical analysis, qualitative research establishes significance through the interpretation of the findings importance, meaningfulness, and potential usefulness (Bloomberg and Volpe 2008).

Working with small, purposeful samples is common in qualitative research, because the goal is to provide an in-depth understanding of social processes and meanings rather than to make broad generalizations (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). In this research, my goal was to understand how first-generation adult students interpreted and made meaning of their early educational experiences and decisions within the context of returning to an academic environment as adults. The importance, meaningfulness, and potential usefulness of the findings appear in the final chapter.

The sample size of 15 participants was determined to be sufficient to answer the research questions in this study. Baker and Edwards (2012) conducted a survey of experts in qualitative methods to address the question of how many interviews are enough for a

qualitative research study. They found that most experts formulated their answer to this question with, “It depends.” The factors that it depends on vary, but tend to involve factors associated with methodology, epistemology, and practicality.

In this research, all three factors were considered when deciding the answer to the question of how many interviews to complete. Data saturation was identified as a way to know when enough interviews were completed. Data saturation is defined as a time when no additional information is learned by completing more interviews (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). The difficulty with using data saturation as the means to know when one has enough interviews is that it can be difficult to determine at the beginning of the research (Baker and Edwards 2012).

To address the need for an operational definition of the concept of data saturation in qualitative research, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) conducted a methodological analysis of data saturation using interview data from 60 in-depth interviews. The researchers found that, when using nonprobabilistic, purposive sampling for interviews, they were able to find the full range of themes used in their research after 12 interviews. Guest et al. (2006) concluded that data saturation occurred after only 12 interviews. Their findings were consistent with other researchers whose goals were to describe perceptions, behaviors, and beliefs among a fairly similar group. In the present research, a sample of 15 was used because the research focus and goals fit into this parameter, and I believe data saturation was reached.

Another methodological challenge included how to analyze and interpret intersectional identities related to inequality based on social class, race, gender, and age (Bowleg 2008; Torres, Jones, and Renn 2009). Intersectional analysis is used to show

how students' experiences are intertwined with systems of inequality. One of the advantages to using an intersectional approach was that it could uncover and allow the examination of privileged and oppressed identities that individuals can possess simultaneously. It can also allow the analysis of the complexity of identities and the power structures in which they operate without essentializing groups or individuals. However, studying intersectional identities poses methodological challenges.

One problem is in developing questions designed to illuminate intersecting experiences without using an additive approach (Bowleg 2008; Torres et al. 2009). A major issue in conducting intersectional research is formulating questions that elicit responses to highlight intersectional experiences. This can be difficult because often researchers discuss issues of multiple marginalized identities in additive terms.

In her own research with black lesbian women, Bowleg (2008) found that the interview questions developed sought to ask about separate identities (black, lesbian, woman) instead of an integrated or intersectional identity (black lesbian). I found this problem in my own research when designing interview questions. I wanted to avoid asking questions about separate marginalized identities to minimize the tendency to use an additive approach. I also wanted to avoid comparing groups based on a single marginalized identity to avoid essentializing groups.

Bowleg (2008) advised that an intersectional interview question should focus exclusively on experiences, rather than separating various identities within the experience. This approach allows the interviewees to discuss their experiences and identities in a way that is important to them. I used this approach in developing my interview protocol. The questions asked participants to describe their experiences within

educational institutions, detailing experiences and events that were important to their educational identities. However, participants often did not explicitly discuss issues related to marginalized identities, which made interpretation difficult.

The other challenge to intersectional research designs is that it may be difficult for participants to fully describe their experiences in terms of intersectional identities. Bowleg (2008) found that interviewees often did not speak explicitly about intersectionality. She suggested that narratives must be analyzed within the social context and not as an individualistic account of experience. To conduct this type of analysis, the researcher must analyze the narrative within the sociohistorical context. The researcher must incorporate sociohistorical data of oppressed groups into the analysis in addition to using the collected data.

Finally, the third challenge in intersectional research arises during the interpretation of data. One of the major issues for researchers conducting intersectional research is how to interpret findings when interviewees discuss some, but not all of the major intersections of inequality in their experiences. To address the issue, researchers must interpret the "individual level data within the larger sociohistorical context of structural inequality that may not be explicit or directly observable in the data" (Bowleg 2008:320). For example, if the interview narrative does not directly discuss sexism, the interviewer cannot assume that sexism did not exist for the person. The researcher must consider the historical and structural location of the person, must consider the context, and must relate it to the narrative. In this way, the researcher can make the intersections explicit, even when the participant did not.

Researchers often assume that variables such as race and class are explanatory variables, when actually the structure of racism and economic inequality is the explaining force (Bowleg 2008). Intersectionality challenges researchers to begin with the experiences of people who live with structural inequality rather than a "traditional top-down approach" (Bowleg 2008:323). More authority rests with the researcher to interpret narratives and represent the stories accurately, which requires the researcher to incorporate strategies to assure trustworthiness of the findings, such as reflection on the researcher's positionality (Bowleg 2008; Torres et al. 2009).

## SUMMARY

A detailed description of the research methodology utilized in this study was provided in this chapter. A qualitative research design was chosen, based on the principles of critical and feminist paradigms, which emphasize the centrality of participants' voice and experience. The use of in-depth, life history interviews allowed me to explore the how educational identities were formed and transformed within the social context of educational institutions. The life-history approach highlighted the turning points and transformations in the participants' lives. A total of 15 interviews were completed, transcribed, and analyzed. A review of the literature occurred prior to the implementation of the research and after the data collection and analysis. The study findings were compared with the literature to provide a full analysis and recommendations for action and future research. The next chapter contains details of findings and analysis related to the Research Question 1.

# CHAPTER IV:

# FINDINGS PART I:
# EARLY EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES, EDUCATIONAL IDENTITIES, AND EDUCATIONAL DECISION-MAKING

The overall purpose of this research was to investigate how educational identities formed and transformed within educational institutions over the lifespan, and how these identities related to decisions about education. The next three chapters contain analysis of the findings that emerged from the 15 in-depth interviews with adult, first-generation college students. The findings in this study are organized around the three major research questions introduced at the beginning of this dissertation and again outlined in the next three chapters. To give a broad range of perspectives from the participants in the study, representative quotations taken from the interviews are provided for each finding. These descriptive quotations help to portray the similarities and variety within the participants' narratives. The overall intent is to describe and explain the social construction of educational identities from the standpoint of the participants.

The findings discussed in this chapter related to the ways in which early educational experiences were interpreted by participants and contributed to the formation of disadvantageous educational identities. Chapter V discusses the social shifts experienced by participants, which lead them to enroll in college later in life. Chapter VI

details the participants' perceptions of educational identity transformations within the field of higher education. Because the processes took several years to unfold and are closely aligned with their life histories, the best means to acquire the data was through intensive, in-depth interviews. The data illustrated the subtle, gradual transformation of negative educational identities into new identities that allowed the adult learner's potential to develop. The process was best revealed through a life-history approach, which helped to uncover patterns of life decisions not easily captured using other methodologies.

## EARLY EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND THE EMERGENCE OF NEGATIVE EDUCATIONAL IDENTITIES

Most (14 of 15; 93 percent) of the participants reported negative schooling experiences during elementary school, high school, or both. In addition to reporting negative schooling experiences, the majority (12 of 15; 80 percent) of participants described early learning experiences using negative terminology or imagery. As discussed previously, the literature on early educational experiences advances that the formative years set the foundation for developing educational identities. The social environment of educational institutions is the context for the development of educational identities, where students learn more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. The school environment teaches students about themselves and beliefs about their academic abilities as well as their place in the larger social world. All the participants in this study were first-generation adult learners who did not attend college directly after high school, but decided to enroll in college later in life. A common theme that emerged from the

narratives of the interviews was that early educational identities were shaped by difficulties in school, and most participants had negative memories of the experiences.

The initial negative experiences in elementary school followed some students to high school, while for others, negative experiences intensified and emerged during high school. A majority (13 of 15; 87 percent) of participants reported beliefs related to their educational identities that prevented or discouraged enrollment in college directly after high school. As participants described the negative educational experiences, they also revealed how the experiences were emotionally troubling and connected to their adverse assumptions about their educational identities.

When describing early educational experiences during their childhood and adolescent years, most (14 of 15; 93 percent) participants described their school experiences as overwhelmingly negative during elementary school, high school, or both. As participants discussed their experiences, they revealed the process by which they socially constructed their educational identify by using negative experiences to shape beliefs about themselves as learners. A majority (12 of 15; 80 percent) of participants described themselves using negative terminology and images as a learner. Therefore, the participants' early experiences in educational institutions were foundational to later negative beliefs participants divulge about their educational identities.

When participants were asked to think about their earliest memories of school, most could remember experiences in elementary school beginning between the first and third grades. The narratives of experiences in elementary school showed some variation in student's experiences. Nearly half the participants (7 of 15; 47 percent) reported fun and meaningful elementary school experiences, while the other half (8 of 15; 53 percent)

reported negative elementary school experiences. The variation of experiences in elementary school contrasted with the greater similarity found in participants' high school experiences. By high school, a majority (13 of 15; 87 percent) of participants consistently reported negative schooling experiences or feelings about school.

In cases in which schooling began as a fun and meaningful experience, nearly half (7 of 15; 47 percent) of the participants had some fond memories. The positive experience narratives reflected memories of learning enjoyment and caring teachers. The narratives of Amy, Alex, and Eva represented some of the ways students discussed positive experiences during elementary school.

Amy reported having positive experiences in elementary school. She remembered just beginning to learn, using art, engaging in fun activities designed to learn math and vocabulary, and teachers who cared and helped her learn.

> Early on in school, I think I did good in the early, early part of school, because that's when, like, the beginning of everything, the beginning of the learning. I did good on that part, and the early part of school is like . . . where you're artistic and all that kind of stuff. . . . [and] the first teacher that really, that I remember . . . I might have been too young before, but that I remember that actually cared and took the time to help students, and like I said, she did fun activities with the students. (Amy–white female, age 33)

Likewise, when asked to describe how he felt about elementary school, Alex replied:

> Fun. There wasn't anything negative up to that point. We're still in elementary, right? . . . It was, it really was. You have no cares in the world when you're that age. You're just playing and learning . . . . (Alex–white male, age 37)

Eva remembered elementary school as fun, where teachers seemed to care about students and helped when students did not understand.

> Oh, it was fun. Everything we did, it was rolled into a game, somehow, to learn. Your colors, your shapes, your alphabet, the letters. You'd sing or you'd build blocks or color something. And the kids, I just remember everybody always laughing and teasing and having a good time. But we were learning at the same

> time. . . . But the teachers were more attentive to the students, it seemed like, back then. And it seems like as you go through school, they're there to teach, and it's not saying, hey, you're having trouble, you might get a tutor. . . . Elementary, the teachers were there to say, hey parents, your child is behind. You need help. This is what we advise you to do. But it seemed like it got more lax as I went through school. (Eva–Hispanic female, age 39)

Interestingly, the positive experiences were often relayed with a forewarning that later schooling experiences were not as positive. Amy mentioned that her elementary school teacher "actually" cared, a forewarning about the uncaring teachers she later encountered in high school. Likewise, Eva said the teachers were "more attentive" to the students, using the "more" to compare them to are high school teachers who she perceived as less (or non) attentive. Alex asked for clarification, "We're still in elementary, right?" before he continued to discuss the positive experiences during elementary school. Still, he related positive experiences of learning that was fun and of teachers who cared.

Unfortunately, the other half of the participants interviewed revealed negative schooling experiences starting in elementary school. Many of the negative experiences were related to undiagnosed learning disorders or social negligence. The students did not feel the joy of learning or care from teachers that the other half of the participants described. Negative schooling experiences reported by students tended to be related to some form of academic or social negligence within the educational institution. As participants described these experiences, the impact on their educational identities was revealed. The participants described major academic difficulties that were misunderstood by themselves and by their teachers.

Marcy explained that she suffered from dyslexia, but that no one knew about it until she was in ninth grade. Marcy's undiagnosed learning disability created significant strife during her early educational experience.

> [Marcy] Being dyslexic made it very difficult. At that time, they really didn't know how to handle it.
> [Interviewer] Did anyone know . . . .
> [Marcy] I wasn't diagnosed until I was in the ninth grade. . . . Sometimes I'd get humiliated. They would call it out or whatever, especially if I was way off base. That was just how it was. (Marcy–white female, age 37)

Marcy explained the difficulties in these experiences:

> In the beginning, I think I tried and tried, and then I just got to the point where I just gave up, I didn't care anymore. It wasn't going to help me; I wasn't going to succeed at it, so why try? . . . If we had to read out loud, I stutter. I still today stutter when I read out loud, because I don't have the confidence I need to be able to sit up and read out loud, and that stems back from the situation of being [inaudible] from the dyslexia, but I can also tell you that the group environment situation was . . . I'm a talker, I can talk to anybody, but you get me in that situation and I'd clam up. (Marcy–white female, age 37)

When Marcy's learning problems became evident in the classroom, teachers and school administrators labeled her as learning deficient and required her to attend special education classes. The classes did not help her learn to overcome dyslexia, but rather gave her less work to complete. Marcy explained,

> Well, they put me in the special ed classes, whatever you want to call them. Lot of good that did, because all they do is, they don't give me as many problems or as many questions to answer. It really didn't help me figure out what was wrong. (Marcy–white female, age 37)

In the same way, Sally did not do well in school because of an undiagnosed reading problem that caused her to hide in the bathroom to avoid being called on in class. She learned to memorize reading assignments and other strategies to hide her deficiencies. Sally explained:

> School itself, I didn't like. I could have done without it. I don't know, the learning problem, the reading problem. Believe it or not, the rest of it was probably okay, but I just didn't like having to teach myself tricks. . . . I didn't do very well because, besides the fact that I have ADD, I had a reading problem. So I learned to memorize everything, not learn it like other kids, but memorize like this word means here and it's the third word in the sentence, especially when they started teaching about verbs and stuff. Our books, when I knew it was coming up, certain things, I would have my Aunt. . . . which is my mom, she's not really my aunt, but she lived a couple doors down, she would help me sit and memorize all this stuff. That way I wouldn't get in trouble at home. History was a little bit difficult, no, it was really difficult for me because you can't memorize some things, dates, what not, but that was harder to do. So when it came to reading, I had to memorize it all . . . because I got to the point where I would actually learn to hide in the bathroom when it came to the hard stuff, because if you're not in the classroom they can't call on you. You can wait them out. (Sally–white female, age 35)

For Marcy and Sally, undiagnosed learning difficulties contributed to remembering early schooling experiences as emotionally and socially difficult. Marcy recalled she "just gave up." However, after moving to a new school during high school, her learning disability was diagnosed and she learned how to overcome some of her difficulties. As a result, she was one of the few participants who did not continue to use negative terminology when describing her educational identity in high school. Conversely, Sally described herself as a troublemaker during elementary school, and as just skimming by while trying to stay unnoticed during high school. When asked to describe herself as a learner during elementary school, Sally replied:

> I stayed in trouble. I remember in kindergarten, I was sitting in the corner. In fact, my mom has the article, newspaper came in, we did something. I don't know what we did, but I had a dunce hat on my head and I was sitting in the corner because I had gotten in trouble and that was our form of punishment, because my mom signed a thing saying I couldn't get spanked, which would almost been easier just to get spanked and get it out of the way. That's not what happened. So newspaper, [local] newspaper came in and took a picture, and I happened to be in the background, so at least I was still in the picture. (Sally–white female, age 35)

As described later in this section, Sally believed the only reason she passed classes was because of her athletic ability.

> Yeah, that's why I got passed. . . . Literally, I should have never been passed, I safely say, from the fourth to the fifth grade, because I did miserably and yet I did because I was in track and basketball and I did very well. I took first in every track meet. So they just let me go. (Sally–white female, age 32)

The experiences within educational institutions influenced Sally's definition of herself. Sally's description of herself throughout school began with troublemaker, then to unfairly passed, and on to just skimming by. Like Marcy and Sally, Cassie also described elementary school experiences related to her learning disability. Cassie's experience with learning difficulties during elementary school was somewhat different because her teachers recognized her learning disability. The intervention chosen by the school was to move Cassie to special education courses. The result of this action was that Cassie was the victim of extreme bullying from other children. School officials ignored the bullying throughout her schooling experiences. The learning intervention used by the school, combined with teachers and administrators ignoring social consequences related to that intervention, caused Cassie severe distress throughout elementary school and into high school.

> Everything really sucked, even through ninth and tenth grade, or sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth all really sucked, really bad. It's hard to talk about because it makes me feel really emotional. . . . I was bullied. I was pushed. I was punched. I was kicked. I was thrown everywhere. I wasn't treated like the kids were supposed to be treated. I was bullied a lot, all the way through high school. (Cassie–white female, age 32).

When asked how school officials responded to the bullying, Cassie replied:

> They wouldn't care. They didn't care. Even if I went to the principal and told the principal anything about it, nothing would happen. They wouldn't get suspended and nothing would be done. (Cassie–white female, age 32)

The negative schooling experience Cassie described is another way negative schooling experiences resulted from school-related negligence. Yet another example of this phenomenon was reflected in the narrative of Diane, who described bullying from other students because of her weight and poverty.

> But it [hating school] wasn't necessarily the work, because I made straight A's. Some teachers were mean; some weren't. The kids, it was terrible. . . . They made fun of me every single day. On the playground, they'd go in a circle, like ring around the rosie, and I'd be in the middle, and teachers or nobody ever stopped them. All kinds of stuff. (Diane–Native American female, age 48)

The schoolwork was not distressing to Diane, yet she did not remember any positive experiences from elementary school. Later, when asked to describe themselves as learners, Cassie and Diane used similar terminology. Cassie described herself as a "loner" who was not a good student and did not "deserve" to graduate. Diane described herself as an "outcast" who did what she could academically.

> I think I was not the smartest one, but I tried to be, as far as I could. It didn't matter, nothing mattered what I did. I still was the **outcast**, the picked-on one. . . . I didn't dress like everybody else, but when I was growing up I wasn't allowed to wear jeans and still don't wear them. . . . (Diane–Native American female, age 48)

An important note is that earlier, Diane stated that she "made straight A's," yet when asked to describe herself as a learner, she stated, "I think I was not the smartest one." While most students who make "A" grades might consider themselves a good student, Diane was hesitant to do so because of the bullying she experienced. The grades did not matter to her educational identity; the social experience did.

Neglect of the social and academic impact of bullying was an important way in which negative schooling experiences happened. Several studies investigated the role of peer victimization in academic achievement and engagement (Buhs, Ladd and Herlad

2006; Espelage et al. 2013; Iyer et al. 2010). Peer victimization is defined as "children's experience of being a target of aggression perpetrated by other children who are not necessarily siblings" (Espelage et al. 2013:234). Osler (2006) emphasized that the definition of aggression in schools was often narrowly defined as physical aggression. She advocated that the definition of violence or aggression should be extended to include systemic violence, indirect violence, and psychological bullying to include the ways in which girls experience school violence.

One form of psychological bullying is peer rejection. Peer rejection is another way students can experience peer victimization. Peer rejection is peer maltreatment that lasts for several years. Peer rejection is associated with later school disengagement (Buhs et al. 2006). Espelage et al. (2013) reviewed the literature on peer victimization and academic challenges. According to the review, several studies found that peer victimization, especially repeated victimization, affected academic performance. Peer victimization in school can negatively affect children's academic participation and achievement, and peer-rejected children are prone to academic problems.

The impact of peer victimization and rejection seemed to have long-term academic and social impacts. Buhs et al. (2006) conducted a longitudinal study to understand the long-term effects of early peer rejection and victimization on student academic engagement and achievement. Peer rejection in early school years led to chronic peer exclusion and declining classroom participation.

Iyer et al. (2010) investigated the relationship between peer victimization, effortful control, school engagement, and academic achievement to better understand the link between victimization and academic achievement. The authors concluded that peer

victimization harmed children's learning and academic engagement. Victimization lowered children's motivation to engage in school activities and then negatively affected academic achievement.

Cassie and Diane's narratives demonstrated the impact of peer victimization on their self-perceptions as a learner. This link appeared in the literature on peer victimization and academic achievement. Espelage et al. (2013) believed the mediating influence from peer victimization on poor academic engagement was a negative self-perception. To actively participate in the classroom, students need to feel secure and to be in a state of emotional well-being. Evidence suggested that improving school climates to reduce victimization was important to improving school-wide academic performance.

Students often described negative experiences in school because of social experiences rather than academic experiences. While this was more common during high school, as discussed later in this section, social difficulties in school caused problems for students as early as elementary school. An example of this is from Mark, who remembered getting into fights because of racist remarks from other students.

> For me, it was real trying. Not so much the schoolwork, but it was the other kids and stuff when I was in elementary, because being biracial, I stayed in a lot of trouble with fights and stuff like that. Depending upon what part of town we lived in, I wasn't going to let anyone talk about my mother or I wasn't going to let anyone speak on my father, so I was always quick-tempered and not willing to argue with anybody a long time. I used to get into a lot of fights in school. . . . (Mark–bi-racial male, age 41)

When asked to describe himself as a student during elementary school, Mark stated that he did well. As demonstrated in the above statement, the difficult aspect of school was not the schoolwork, but rather social relationships. As Mark progressed

through school, he became more focused on “blending in” than on academic performance.

> I was more of the students trying to blend in and be cool. [Chuckle] That’s what I did. I went to school; learning was not the top of my priorities when I was in high school, to be honest with you. Just trying to be with the in crowd. (Mark–bi-racial male, age 41)

During elementary school, the difficult social relationships did not directly affect his educational identity. However, by high school, Mark’s desire to fit into social groups changed the way he described his educational identity.

> It affected me dramatically. My grades were just mediocre, passing, maybe a C student. I wasn’t trying to make anything else. I was just basically trying to pass my grade, make the minimum. (Mark–bi-racial male, age 41)

During elementary school, half of the participants recalled positive learning experiences, while the other half recalled negative learning experiences. For those who remembered negative experiences during elementary school, the experiences tended to be a result of academic or social neglect within educational institutions. Students were bullied without intervention. Students’ learning disabilities went undiagnosed. For some students, academic performance was less important to them than were struggles with social relationships. The resulting impact of such experiences on student educational identity was academic disengagement, which increased as the students moved into high school.

## “HORRIBLE, AWFUL, AND SCARY”: DISENGAGEMENT AND ACADEMIC MARGINALIZATION IN HIGH SCHOOL

This section contains a discussion of participants’ educational experiences in high school, where most participants (13 of 15; 87 percent) reported feeling disenfranchised. During high school, learning became less meaningful and many participants describe

losing interest in the learning aspect of school. Learning was not meaningful to who they were, to their identities, and the message became that school was not a place where they belonged. When asked to describe high school, participants frequently used terms such as "horrible," "awful," and "scary." Participants described losing interest in learning and "just getting by." The reasons for this loss of interest varied, but tended to revolve around failure in academics, peer relationships, and negative experiences with teachers.

Participants emphasized how learning lost its meaningfulness and consisted of pre-defined parameters, leaving little opportunity to connect learning in high school to the students' lives. Students also lost interest in learning during high school when social standing and peer relationships became more important to them and those around them. Teachers played a significant role in the ways the participants perceived high school, and a majority (13 of 15; 87 percent) of participants reported negative experiences with teachers during high school. Participants reported the teachers seemed to lose interest in them, reinforcing the social hierarchy of students within the school. As a result of these experiences, students did not identify themselves with the academic components of schooling. The details about the negative high school experiences and their effects on educational identities are highlighted in the narratives of participants.

The ways in which participants described high school offered insight into the negative experiences. When asked to describe teaching and learning during high school, participants adopted negative terminology, such as, "nightmare", "depressing", and "awful" before expanding on specific details surrounding such feelings. Some examples of these descriptions are presented here.

> I absolutely, completely, and utterly thought it was the worst time of my life. They had all gone to school since they were little and it was a nightmare. I hated

> it. I hated it worse than grade school. That's when I started actually failing classes and not caring. . . . I didn't want to be there. I knew I didn't really belong there. That's the impression that I got. So I was, like, you know what, I don't care about your little school spirit. I don't care about your little music. Let's go out and do this and support the school and the town. I didn't care. I was like, whatever. (Joseph–white male, age 38)
>
> Awful. High school was awful. . . Dreaded. I hated it. Sad. Depressing. I mean, every morning it was a fight to get up and go to school. I dreaded getting up and going. (Eva–Hispanic female, age 39)
>
> At the time, I really wasn't enjoying it and I couldn't wait to graduate. I just wanted to be out of there. (Kimberly–white female, age 51)
>
> I thought high school was a big game. I thought it was a joke. I totally got so disillusioned in high school. (Cheryl–white female, age 53)

The words used to describe high school offered insight into students' feelings about their educational experiences and about themselves. Even within these descriptions of high school, we can see how the negative experiences become solidified to identity. For example, when Joseph described the "nightmare" of high school, he also expressed that he "knew" he "really didn't belong." By looking deeper into their narratives, some patterns emerged as to why high school evoked such negative terminology.

*Lack of Meaning, Lack of Belonging, and Disengagement from Learning*

The interaction of social and academic marginalization in high school further solidified negative educational identities. The participants often recalled feeling powerless, which often led to disengagement in school. The lack of not being rewarded academically and not feeling valued by teachers helped to solidify a negative educational identity during high school. For people like Daniel, who did not find any interest in school, high school was like a prison:

> It sucked that you're a kid. You don't have control of your own destiny. You have to, within the parameters that are described by you, fit down this narrow path. . . . Yeah, they weren't really my interests. . . . (Daniel–white male, age 48)

Likewise, Amy's lack of interest in high school was related to the fact that academic learning was no longer useful. She recalled that memorization without context became more important to teachers and that information was "crammed down" her throat.

> High school, basically, like I said before, I took it as the teachers just trying to cram the stuff down your throat to get you to, like, memorize it enough to get passed and graduate, and that's about it. . . .I remember [inaudible] high school, what am I going to do with this stuff? I'm not ever going to use this. I'm not going to need history, I'm not going to need, well, science, maybe, but most of that stuff, I'm not ever going to need. So I just, I guess it was kind of the teacher trying to cram it down your throat and me just trying to get by and not really caring. So there wasn't really interaction where we would sit together as here [college]. You can actually go to the teacher, and "I'm not understanding this, can you go over it with me?" We really didn't have too much of that in high school. It was just in class, "Hey, I have a question." Blah, blah, blah, they read it off and that's all you had. . . It was just like, here's the information, do this work, bring it back. If you had a question, like I said, raise your hand, here's how it is, do that one. But you might have more [questions], but you don't want to sit there and keep raising your hand because nobody else is. So you kind of felt out of place if you weren't catching on. I think it was more, I just kind of sat back because nobody else was raising their hand, so I didn't want to be the one constantly, "Hey, I have a question, I have a question." . . . I just scraped through to graduate and said I would never go to college; I would never go back to school. But here I am**.** (Amy–white female, age 33)

Like Daniel, Amy's disengagement from learning made her feel uninterested and "out of place," which intensified when she did not understand the material. Amy's negative educational experience facilitated the process for her to disassociate from the academic aspects of school. She and Daniel just did not see the relevance. This is another way of saying that one's identity is different from what is taught in school. "School is not meaningful to me," and therefore, "I don't belong."

Experiencing and feeling out of place in school was reinforced through student-teacher interactions. As representatives of educational institutions, teachers symbolized the importance of school and provided students with powerful messages about their

ability to learn. High school experiences were often linked to how students interpreted teacher behavior and attitudes. Teachers often appeared to be not interested in teaching. They made students feel invisible or gave the impression that they did not want to be there. Examples of these experiences were reflected in the narratives of Alex and Joseph.

When Alex was initially asked to describe his relationship with teachers, he stated, "non-existent," which he attributed to his own lack of interest. When asked if any teachers initiated relationships with him, Alex replied:

> Not really, no. I felt like nobody took the time. If they seen that I was struggling, I don't know what they should of, would of, could of done. I never really got that, "Can you listen? You're not going to graduate. Let's take a look at this." Nobody really ever did that, so no. I'm not saying I was the one knocking on their doors either, going, help me, but at the same time, nobody ever reached out. (Alex–white male, age 37)

Joseph also had the impression that teachers did not want to be at the school or that they did not like teaching.

> I think they were kind of pissed off that they were teaching in a small school, a lot of them, because they thought they were hot crap. But then some of them had been teaching there for so long, they thought it was some sort of privilege for me to be in their class. I thought they sucked, except for one. (Joseph–white male, age 38)

Presenting information not connected to students' lives and identity spurred students to lose interest in high school. Teachers who were perceived as disinterested in students or teaching reinforced this feeling. As symbols of the educational institution, teachers supported the students' beliefs that they did not belong.

School failure often is approached using a deprivation model in which school officials and scholars look for reasons for failure within the individual student or as part of cultural characteristics of specific groups (Kelly 2009; Rubin 2007). The experiences detailed in the participants' narratives pointed to the importance of the social context of

schools in student self-perceptions and academic achievement. Rubin (2007) found similar associations between social context and learner identities while exploring how learner identities developed within the context of an urban high school serving primarily low-income students of color. Rubin analyzed the school context and students' sense of self as learners through school and classroom observations and student interviews. Taking a situated perspective, where learning was shaped by the context in which the students learned, Rubin reframed the concept of student failure and claimed that students learned more than academic skills in schools. Students also learned to understand their place in the world, where learning was a "process of identity construction" (Rubin 2007:220).

In the same way, Kelly (2009) pointed out that studies focused on academic engagement inequalities could not ignore the role of school context, encompassing school and instruction, and student perceptions of opportunity. Separating the low-engaging context (school and instruction) from student identities is difficult. For example, students labeled as low-track are channeled into classrooms that tend to emphasize memorization, order, and rules, which represent low levels of unity between lessons and students' lives. The context impacts learner identities, and learner identities influences school engagement.

Participants' descriptions of school context in the present study were similar to the observations by Birch (2013) and Rubin (2007). After analyzing life-history narratives, Birch (2013) described the early educational experiences of adults in the U.K. who left formal education with few or no qualifications. The high school context described by the adults contained themes of disengagement from learning, beliefs that

formal learning in high school lacked meaningfulness, instances of bullying, and low teacher expectations.

Rubin (2007) found that the figured world of the urban school "emphasized rote learning over conceptual understanding, enforced compliance, and negated inquiry" (p.218). The practices of learning observed in the environment were devoid of meaning and easily forgettable. Learning was "narrow, repetitive, meaning-free, and unrelated to life" (Rubin 2007:229). Learning had little relevance to the personal or social realities of the students; concepts were not expanded in any meaningful way, and questions were limited to closed-ended responses. In this school, a great deal of attention was paid to the formatting of assignments rather than to the content.

Teachers spent a lot of time engaged in non-academic talk about their own personal lives, such as vacation and weekend plans. Other non-academic activities included organizing games and reviewing rules. Yet, teachers often complained about being pressed for time. Substantive topics were treated briefly, with little student engagement, even when students showed clear interest in potentially engaging topics. Critical questions about subjects presented were ignored or led to student punishment. Students were asked to just pretend to learn, and teachers used tests and quizzes as a form of humiliation rather than an assessment of learning. Teachers were even observed telling students that they did not care about their issues or problems. Students were often categorized as deficient, and humiliation was used as a form of social control. All of these practices were so normalized in the environment that they happened in plain sight of outside observers (Rubin 2007).

Rubin (2007) explained that the learning that happened in the school had "powerful implications for students' identities as learners and for their future opportunities" (p.225). The school context constrained learner identities in such a way that being a good student involved compliance with adult instructions and the letter grade on tests and report cards. To achieve high grades, students had to comply with humiliating interactions, complete meaningless and repetitive tasks such as worksheets quickly, pay attention, and avoid getting in trouble.

The environment had negative consequences for academic engagement (Rubin 2007). Students were proud when they achieved a high grade on a test, but when asked what the test was about, they could not remember. Students talked about wanting to do well, but blamed themselves for their lack of interest in the subjects and for not doing well on the tasks described above. The students called themselves "stupid" when they were unable to complete rote tasks quickly. There were no alternate versions for defining "smart" in this environment. Like the participants in the current study, Rubin found that the school context was important to student self-perceptions and student engagement.

*Social Relationships and Disengagement from Learning*

Another noteworthy theme related to loss of interest during high school included a focus on social relationships. Specifically, participants reported they began to lose interest in high school because of the increased self-imposed or institutional focus on social standing and peer relationships. The shift in focus from academics to social standing and relationships was described as self-initiated by some and imposed on them by others. For some students, like Alex and Amy, the change in focus from academics to

social relationships was described as a self-initiated way of bonding with others who were similar to themselves.

Alex first explained how he felt about learning in high school, and then continued to explain his shift in focus toward social relationships with those who were similar to him.

> Loss of interest, would rather do other things, not necessarily bad things, just loss of interest due to, "I don't want to be here. I'd rather be doing other stuff." . . . So I was basically not there. I was there, but not there mentally. . . . It was boring. Social, I was there for social purposes. I wanted to hang with friends and do other stuff; that's all I cared about. So it was social time for me instead of work. (Alex–white male, age 37)

Alex continued,

> The friends I was around were just doing enough to get through as well. So if you pick better set of friends, or stay close to the nerds in school . . . No, everybody I ran with was roughly the same way. Their home lives were roughly the same as well, single-parent homes, where the Moms were just, like, "Do your work." Not really sitting down and saying, "Let's do this, or "Show me what you need to do," or anything like that. (Alex–white male, age 37)

Similar to Alex's narrative, Amy described elementary school in positive terms, but by high school, she found she had lost interest in academics and focused more on social aspects.

> Like I said, I really wasn't much into school. I did enough to get by. I was more into the friends and talking to the friends in high school, which, they all were just trying to do enough to get by. I heard out of a lot of them, "I'll never go back to school, never go back to school," but it seemed like the kids who had the rich parents, who drove the nice cars, had all the nice clothes, of course they were going to [large state universities] wherever, right out of high school. Whereas the ones who had single parents in high school, of course, we had to work, because if we had to have a car to get back and forth, we had to have a job to pay gas, buy our clothes, things like that. (Amy–white female, age 33)

Alex and Amy provided examples of how students invested in social relationships rather than academics during high school. The shift was described as voluntary, to bond

with other students in social circumstances similar to their own. Alex and Amy identified with others who had to work for necessities and did not plan to continue schooling past high school. Their negative educational identity was such that they did not think it was possible to pursue an education beyond high school because of the costs. By labeling more academically successful students as "nerds" or "kids who had the rich parents," they disassociated themselves by using narratives that emphasized social relationships with those who were similar to themselves. The educational institution did not provide a sense of belongingness, but these friendships do.

Other students described their focus on social relationships in high school as something imposed on them by either the formal or informal social structures in the school. The seemingly compulsory categorization of students into various peer groups led some students to feel they did not belong, and thus not care about their educational record. The narratives of Kimberly, Anna, Eva, and Cassie demonstrated the various ways in which social standing became more important than academics in providing students with messages about their place and their high school experiences.

Similar to observations made by Luttrell (1997), students perceived their exclusion from specific social groups as the product of economic circumstances. Kimberly believed the categorization of students into peer groups was based on economic status and appearance, which were outside her control. Kimberly explained how cliques were formed at her school:

> If you were in the clique, then you were accepted, and if you weren't, you'd get kind of shunned. . . . [The cliques were based on] looks a lot, personality sometimes, type of family you came from. . . . [Families not accepted were] poor, type of job your dad did, how you were raised, how fancy your house was. You don't live in a brick house; you live in a trailer house. (Kimberly–white female, age 51)

Those who were poor were shunned by peers, while those who lived in middle-class homes were accepted by peers.

Likewise, Anna described the seemingly compulsory social groups in her high school. In her case, racial identification was a more dominant identifier than economic status. After moving to a new state and new school during high school, Anna often found herself scared during school. She reported that education was no longer important and social groups dominated most interactions in the school. Compounding this experience, the social groups were based on racial group membership: As a consequence, racial tension existed between different groups. As a Hispanic student, Anna quickly discovered she was expected to socialize only with other Hispanics. She experienced being ostracized when she tried to cross racial lines for social relationships.

> I can remember sitting on the steps at the high school, and just sitting there, and just waiting for time to go by, because it was during lunch. And then all the Hispanic girls, "Oh, did you see the new girl, that's the new girl," and blah, blah, blah, and I'm sitting right there. But no one talked to me, and of course, the guys were like, "Oh hi, my name is blah, blah, blah." Then you hear all the girls, "Oh yeah, now she's going to think she's all that." So it was not even on an educational level anymore, it was like, you better fend for yourself. You better show these people that either you're down or. . . Then once you finally get to know people, and then you finally see, oh, that person doesn't like me or that person doesn't like me, so then you kind of knew who to hang out with and who not to hang out with. Then there; they were like, "We see you with the black people, you'll be in trouble." . . . Even in the classroom, the teachers were like, "Alright students," and it was just like people throwing papers and people yelling and stuff. I was just sitting there, like, I'm scared, because if I don't do what they're doing . . . I still didn't do it because I was, like, I've never done that, and how am I going to do that to the teacher. Even though in some cases I would be, like, left out. . . . It's just I would sit there and listen, or half the time, it was just like, okay, sit there, be quiet, give respect, but it would go in one ear and out the other ear because I was afraid of everything else that was going on. (Anna–Hispanic female, age 30)

According to Tatum (1997), a racial identity development scholar, self-segregation into peer groups based on race or ethnic identification is a common developmental strategy during adolescence. Students who identify with a racial minority group experience a period of exploration of their racial identity during adolescence. The exploration phase is often precipitated by personal experience with racism, which gives the individual a heightened awareness of issues related to race. Peer groups based on racial group membership are a common defensive mechanism to the experience of racism, rejection of racial stereotypes, and racial identity exploration (Tatum 1997). However, school context plays a role in peer group segregation through ability tracking, where racial minorities are more often assigned to a lower track than to an honors track, and therefore are grouped together through the structural rules of the school.

Anna did not experience racial peer group segregation as an exploration phase of racial identity development. Perhaps because she was new to the school, she found the racial segregation counter-productive to academic pursuits. Anna had trouble concentrating on learning because of the strong peer pressure that enforced social groups and racial boundaries her high school. She stated that she had to use most of her energy on self-preservation ("fend for yourself") rather than on educational material.

Garcia-Reid (2008) reviewed the trends in educational outcomes of Hispanic youth in the United States and found Hispanic youth had the highest high school dropout rate among any ethnic or racial group in the United States, more than twice as high as the dropout rate of non-Hispanic white students. Research on this trend pointed to structural issues within educational institutions that negatively affected Hispanic youth, such as low teacher expectations and poor conditions in schools. Hispanic youth often attended low-

income schools where the physical condition of the school was inferior, classrooms were overcrowded, and teachers had lower qualifications than did those at higher-income schools.

Hispanic youth often lacked opportunities to take courses that would prepare them for college and were underrepresented in advance placement and gifted education courses. Garcia-Reid (2008) maintained that the structural conditions in such schools represented structural violence to Hispanic youth and other students similarly affected. Structural violence is defined as economic and political structures that constrain human potential and that are often invisible to those affected by the unequal distribution of resources. Such invisibility was often the result of beliefs about the educational competence of Hispanic students.

> These educational environments are clearly disempowering and fail to contribute to the development of positive educational identities among their student population. And because of the mechanisms by which structural violence occurs are at an invisible or submerged level, many individuals are unable to identify how these processes are related to school disengagement or potential dropout, and therefore are more likely to attribute academic failure among Hispanic youths to personal deficiencies. (Garcia-Reid 2008:237)

According to Garcia-Reid, Peterson, and Reid (2013), Hispanic youth and other students of color were more likely to have teachers with less experience and fewer qualifications than were students from higher-income families. Often, teachers were not trained to work with diverse cultures or the students in the population that they taught.

Eva did not directly attribute social status in high school to racial group membership; however, she explained the academic and social consequences of imposed social standing in her high school.

> I was the one that was not a student. I did what I had to, to get to graduation. And that was it. It was just, once you get out of elementary, that's when the cliques in

> school start happening. And you're just like, well if you're not in this certain clique, you're looked down on. Social standing was everything. It didn't matter what you did school-wise. If you were smart, you were a nerd or a geek, and you didn't want to be that. But yet, you didn't want to be stupid, because then. . . You know? You're categorized and they don't know what they're talking about. I just stayed right in the middle. I did what I had to, to pass. I played my sports. I just was not into it at all. And I hated the social standing at [high school]. (Eva–Hispanic female, age 39)

Though Eva defined herself as "not a student," she tried to maintain just the right amount of academic effort to pass classes without standing out as either a "nerd" or "stupid." The social consequence of academic labels could be devastating to students, as demonstrated through Cassie's narrative. Cassie, who attended special education classes because of a learning disability, continued to suffer from bullying throughout high school. Not only was she alienated from peers, she was actively harassed.

> I find [the] high school . . . was just a very violent, rude, gang city, drugs, just very bad. There's been people up there that actually had committed suicide by jumping off the building. . . . It still brings back where I was getting ready to basically take my own self, because I just didn't want to be in this world. I'm tired of being bullied, I was tired of being pushed around and tired of being called retarded and all that kind of stuff. I was heading into a moment. I was about to get their medication and I was going to take them. Part of me just said, It's not going to help. You're just going to be dead and they're going to be suffering. (Cassie–white female, age 32)

Some respondents reported they were forced into peer groups while others considered them voluntary. Those who described the shift in focus to social relationships as self-initiated did so to find others like themselves, with similar life circumstances. The peer groupings reinforced the belief that college was not an option, and students tended to associate with others with similar identities. Those who described the shift in focus to social relationships as institutional or imposed on them by peers developed identities focused on self-preservation. They pushed aside academic growth and development to focus on surviving the social circumstances of high school. Academically, these students

did the bare minimum to pass classes and avoid unwanted attention. The result was that they also did not identify themselves with the academic components of attending high school.

Studies on academic adjustment in K-12 schools had focused primarily on the role of teachers and parents on academic adjustment (Ryan 2011). But more recently, the role of peer relationships in academic adjustment gained increased scholarly attention. Lynch, Lerner, and Leventhal (2013) examined the role of peer culture in schools on individual academic achievement and engagement. Peer culture included not just a student's immediate peer group, but also an overall perception of peer interactions within the school. Schools were found to have unique peer cultures that affected individual student engagement and achievement. Peer culture included acceptable behaviors and attitudes, student interactions and relationships, and students' perceptions of such interactions and relationships. A hostile and negative peer culture was associated with low academic achievement and engagement. Lynch et al. (2013) proposed that researchers should expand the effect of peers in school to include peers with whom individuals may not have any contact. However, peer culture is influenced by other interactions within and outside schools and is just one piece of the overall school context.

*Teacher Favoritism and Disengagement from Learning*

The focus on social standing in high school was often supported within the educational institution. For students, teachers are the most significant symbol of the institution. Participants reported that teachers often reinforced the student social cliques in high school. Directing more positive attention to those students whose families were wealthy or to those students who were good at sports was one manner in which teachers

supported social cliques. The following examples demonstrated how students perceived teacher inattention or favoritism based on socio-economic status.

> [Teachers gave] just little favoritism for test scores, or whether or not they got the attention in class to get a question answered, or if they let them slide if their essay wasn't as good as somebody thought it might be. They might be a little more critical of the stuff that you would do. . . . The teacher knew their parents; might socialize with them on the side, because they were friends as well as teachers. I can picture the girls [who received attention]. I know which ones they were. (Kimberly–white female, age 51)

> [Teachers paid attention to] usually the rich ones, stuck up. . . . They (teachers) see how they can make their life better, when their life is already good. Hey, it's us, we're the ones you need to make better. (Diane–Native American female, age 48)

> I just wanted to do what I had to, to get out of that school. I hated it so much. And the teachers were really bad about it. If your parents didn't make six figures, you didn't matter. And they made you feel that way. (Eva–Hispanic female, age 39)

Luttrell (1996, 1997) found similar narratives of teacher favoritism during early educational experiences in her analysis of the life stories of women in adult literacy programs. The women relayed stories of teachers valuing traits and characteristics most associated with economically advantaged girls, who were perceived by teachers as "intelligent" or "valuable" (p.114). The girls who came from economically advantaged families held a type of cultural capital that seemed to justify their superior position within the classroom. These students erre referred to as "teacher's pets" in the narratives. Students dealt with the lack of teacher recognition through silence and invisibility or adopting the logic of the school by internalizing the messages within their own educational identities. Luttrell (1997) found that early educational experiences shaped students' social identity: "Their stories drew upon a world of women–teachers, mothers,

daughters–who were judged and who judged themselves according to how successfully they met the demands of school" (p.115).

Students not only recognized favoritism toward other students based on social class, but they also recognized discrimination toward themselves. Adair (2003) analyzed how low-income children were treated in school. Adair explained that in our culture, those in the middle class were seen as "normative," while those who were poor are seen as "pathological." Adair (2003) explained how poor children in school were "laughed at for their 'ugly shoes,' their crooked and ill-serviced teeth, and the way they 'stank,' as teachers excoriated them for their inability to concentrate in school, their 'refusal' to come to class prepared with proper supplies, and their unethical behavior when they tried to take more than their allocated share of 'free lunch" (p.31). After interviewing former classmates who were also poor children, Adair found that students related similar stories about how they were treated by peers, teachers, and administrators.

In addition to perceived preferential treatment based on socio-economic status, participants discussed other types of teacher favoritism based on athletic participation and ability. Teacher attention based on athletic ability had negative consequences for both those neglected and those who received positive attention based on the non-academic quality. Eva's narrative offered a good example of how teachers supported social cliques based on athletic ability and participation.

> Football players were top of the list. Football players, cheerleaders . . . They got away with murder. I mean, if they were in class, fine. If they weren't, they still pass. You know? And it would make you sick to see how they treated them, especially if that coach taught a class. Well 90 percent of the football players were in that class. . . .They were treated like royalty at school. And if you didn't play football or cheerleader or even their dance squad, forget it. They were like royalty at school and the rest of us were like their peasants. . . . We were treated just like

> a peasant would be treated. We got the bare minimum from them. Unless you switched over to a sport, and then you were okay. (Eva–Hispanic female, age 39)

When asked how this affected her and other students, Eva replied, "It hurt us. We had to struggle to teach ourselves out of that book that the teacher was putting out" (Eva–Hispanic female, age 39). Eva's perception of being treated "like a peasant" influenced how she participated in school. Later, when asked how she would describe herself as a learner in school, Eva replied that she "did just enough to get by."

The students who benefited from being athletes also reported negative effects on their educational identities. Marcy and Sally described how they believed they passed classes because of their skills in sports and not because of their academic aptitude.

> On the actually doing the schoolwork, they kind of just overlooked me and just kept on . . . I was good at sports, so they just passed me over. I really believe that's why I passed. (Marcy–white female, age 37)

> Yeah, that's why I got passed. . . , Literally, I should have never been passed, I safely say, from the fourth to the fifth grade, because I did miserably and yet I did [pass] because I was in track and basketball and I did very well. I took first in every track meet. So they just let me go. (Sally–white female, age 35)

Teacher reinforcement of social cliques and athletic favoritism in high school influenced student engagement in the classroom and self-beliefs. Students disengaged from the academic aspects of school when they experienced inattention or neglect from teachers based on social group membership or lack of membership. When students received favoritism based on a non-academic attribute, like athletic ability, they attributed passing classes to this favoritism rather than to their own academic abilities. In this way, the belief that they were not capable of academic success and that they did not deserve to pass classes became part of their educational identities.

Rodriguez (2008) concluded that recognition by adults in school was an important factor related to academic achievement when he examined the relationships between urban high school students and the adults in a low-income urban high school. The study explored the concept of recognition of students by adults, primarily teachers, in schools and the student perception that adults cared about them. Recognition of students included being known by adults, talking to adults, and engaging with adults. Rodriguez suggested that recognition and caring should be examined from the students' perspective, because such attention transformed students from objects of study to subjects in education.

Rodriguez (2008) concluded that teacher recognition of the humanity of students led to healthy student-adult relationships that helped develop the student's sense of self within the school. During interviews, students discussed the importance of teacher-student relationships to their attitudes about school and future educational aspirations. The most important aspects of the adult-student relationship included adults in the school knowing them, talking to them, engaging with them, and encouraging them. Students believed it was important for adults in school to recognize student issues outside academics and the school. In this way, the adults acknowledged the students' humanity.

As first-generation, adult students reflected on their early experiences within educational institutions, experience and identity had clear links. Similar links between early educational experiences and educational identities were found by Birch (2013). Similar to processes in my own study, Birch used life-history narratives to gather data about learning cultures, educational identities, and the decision to engage in learning. While the study included a sample from the United Kingdom, the sample included some demographics similar to those in my own research.

The adults in the Birch (2013) study left formal education with few or no qualifications and had not engaged in formal education since then. Six men and six women who fell under this parameter participated in interviews about their educational identities, early educational experiences, and views of learning. The difference between the Birch sample and mine was that the students I interviewed had decided to enroll in school and attended formal education at the time of the interview, while Birch's participants were not enrolled in formal education.

The narratives of participants in Birch's (2013) study reflected themes similar to those I found in the interviews from my sample. The early educational experiences (high school) of participants included themes of disengagement from learning, beliefs that formal learning in high school lacked meaningfulness, instances of bullying, and low teacher expectations. To assess educational identities, Birch (2013) developed five categories of educational identity and asked participants to select from one of the five. The five categories included "I wasn't expected to do well in school," "I didn't like school," "I could have done better," "Other things were more important at the time," and "None of the options" (p.53). Many participants chose two or more of the options, reflecting the complexity of educational identities.

Based on her analysis, Birch (2013) concluded that educational identities were influenced by experiences in educational institutions, that these identities persisted into adulthood, and that educational identities influenced later decisions about engaging in education. Birch (2013) stated that educational identities developed in high school had "a lasting effect on their disposition to learn" (p.54). The "deficit perspective" of those who

do not engage in learning "discounts the complex reasons underlying their reluctance to re-engage" (Birch, 2013:54) in learning.

For the participants in the current study, academic disengagement was a common response from students who encountered early learning difficulties or social isolation. While only half of these participants reported difficulties during elementary school, by high school, most participants reported significant negative experiences within educational institutions. Some students reported they did not connect with the academic content in high school. They lost interest in what was taught because it was not meaningful to them. As a result, they described themselves as "not belonging" in an academic setting. Feeling as though they did not belong in the educational institution is also a consequence of an increased focus on social relationships that accompanied moving into high school.

Whether students described the focus on social relationships as self-imposed or compulsory within the institution, the effect on students' educational identities was similar. Students described themselves as feeling as though they did not belong in school while doing just enough academic work to pass classes. Those who reported that they did not fit in with any social group became focused on self-preservation rather than on academics. Often, teachers reinforced the importance given to the social categorization of students through the teachers' actions and attitudes. Such experiences sent the message that the students' interests and abilities were not important and that they did not belong in educational institutions. As a consequence, most students were eager to graduate or to leave before graduation and hoped never to return to another educational institution.

## EDUCATIONAL IDENTITIES IN DECISIONS ABOUT COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

The participants in this research did not attend college directly after high school. Much of the decision not to continue education past high school was directly related to their experiences in educational institutions. A majority (13 of 15; 87 percent) of participants reported that beliefs related to their educational identity prevented or discouraged enrollment in college directly after high school. Participants described the decision as involving factors related to their feelings about high school, beliefs about their academic abilities, and their life circumstances at the time of graduation. In this way, the decision not to attend college directly after high school included internalized beliefs and external circumstances. Students often discussed such factors as intertwined, and they could not view them independently. For most (13 of 15; 87 percent) participants, beliefs related to their educational identity prevented and discouraged enrollment in college after high school.

### *Perceptions of the College Environment*

A major determining factor that kept participants from enrolling in college initially was the fear that college would be an extension of high school experiences. For most participants, their high school years reinforced a belief that they were not academically inclined and therefore did not belong in a college environment. The narratives of Amy and Joseph demonstrated this phenomenon. Amy described "hating" high school. When she thought about college, she immediately dismissed it, because she thought the college learning environment would be similar to that of high school.

> I just remember it [high school] being not fun and horrible. That was the reason why I was, like, I really want to go to college, but I really don't want to experience that again. So I was linking high school, the same way college would be. . . . I hated high school, I hated it. I did enough to get by and I just hated it. . . .

> I thought it would be like high school: teachers cramming stuff down your throat, and I'm just like, ahhhh, I don't get it, I don't get it, and I thought if I go, I'm going to fail out, and waste that money. (Amy–white female, age 33)

Importantly, Amy linked her experience of academic confusion ("I don't get it") in high school to her belief that she would "fail out" of college. She thought the college learning environment would be similar to her experiences in high school where "teachers (were) cramming stuff down your throat."

Joseph felt so out of place in his high school that he did not even consider attending college. When asked if he considered attending college, he explained that all he thought about was leaving the town where he lived.

> Get me out of here, now. That was the goal. . . . No [I did not consider going to college]. I wanted to get as far away from that place as I possibly could. All the little colleges everyone was going to were around. So I was gone. (Joseph–white male, age 38)

In addition to wanting to leave the small town where he attended high school, Joseph believed college was for "smart people," which was not how he described himself.

> I thought college was for smart people. Just the fact. . . . I struggled so bad in algebra that I failed it consistently and I just couldn't figure it out. And then after a while, they started to diagnose different conditions. I got like, I think there's a math learning disability that there was. I think I just got so frustrated because I couldn't figure it out that I didn't care. (Joseph–white male, age 38)

As noted earlier, students became disengaged in academics during high school because of their perceptions that the curriculum lacked meaning to them, often compounded by social factors. Students who discussed a strong focus on peer relationships during high school also described themselves as poor students. Their negative educational identities as poor students kept them from considering, and therefore, attending college. The narratives of Mark, Alex, and Robert offered good examples of this tendency.

Mark described the importance fitting into peer groups had for him during high school. At the time of his high school graduation, Mark described thinking about his choices between attending college and joining the military. He decided to join the military rather than go to college because he believed he needed to break ties with his high school peer group and because he did not think he would be successful in college.

> I was, like, weighing college and the military, and I felt like the military, crazy as it sounds, was going to be less painless, and ultimately I was going to piss my dad off, so that's the way I went. . . . Failing, that was my biggest . . . It wasn't even a fear, it was just like I had got so used to disappointment that I brought on myself, I thought college was just totally out of the question. I was thinking at the time when I was in high school, because of the company I was hanging around with and my friends, I figured that if I waited after high school, I wasn't going to do anything, so I said I'm going to go straight. I went four days after graduation, went straight to basic. (Mark–bi-racial male, age 41)

Mark believes college was "out of the question" because his academic experience in high school included disappointment and failure. He knew that part of the reason for his failures during high school was focusing too strongly on fitting in with peers.

In the same way, Alex and Robert described themselves as more focused on social relationships than on academics during high school. Their educational identities at the time of high school graduation dissuaded them from considering college attendance. Alex described himself as "an absolutely terrible student," and Robert described himself as not a "school-type person."

> But at the time, I had no interest. I wasn't realizing what I was doing to myself, I didn't realize it. I had no intentions of college, unless somebody threw a scholarship at me, which wasn't going to happen, because you look at those grades and they . . . "Ohhhh, are you kidding me? This dumb-dumb!" Anyway, so I was just an absolutely, terrible student. (Alex–white male, age 37)

> Never. Never had thought about college**.** Back when I was growing up in school, I wasn't a school-type person. I was more like the class clown. I wanted all the attention on me, every single class, every class. Once I got out of school, I

> graduated, but once I got out of school, college was no issue. (Robert–African American male, age 41)

Students who experienced difficulties in high school due to obligatory social categorization also developed educational identities that were disengaged from academics. Such students were likely to discuss their educational identity as self-preservation, where they did the minimum work expected to pass classes. Cassie was one of the students who described herself as a "loner" during high school, and she suffered through bullying from other students. By the time she graduated from high school, she believed that teachers had only passed her because they did not want to teach her for another semester or year. Because Cassie did not believe she deserved to graduate from high school, she did not think she had the knowledge needed to attend college. "Graduating wasn't a good thing, because I never really got taught. Yeah, whippty doo, I got my diploma, but it doesn't prove that I actually deserved it" (Cassie–white female, age 32).

Diane was another student who felt like an "outcast" during high school. By the time she reached 12th grade, she had become so disengaged from education that she dropped out.

> But my 12th grade year, I just finally said forget about it. I got tired of dealing with all the kids and trying to figure out . . . Dealing with my aunt, the home life: I just said forget it and left. (Diane–Native American female, age 48)

In fact, three participants, Alex, Diane, and Sally, related that they did not graduate from high school with their class. All three described their educational identities as disengaged from academics. Like Diane, Sally reported being miserable in high school and finally gave up. She was pregnant and married by age 15. On the other hand, Alex actually participated in his high school graduation with the intention of finishing his

requirements in summer school. However, once he began working for pay, he no longer cared about graduating from high school because he was making money.

> I had my career, in a sense, because in my mind, it could do nothing but go up. You didn't think of layoffs and recessions. You think, "I can do nothing but go up from here." They're not going to go back and go, "Hey, we hired you 12 years ago. Where is your GED or where is your high school diploma?" At the time, they didn't care. (Alex–white male, age 37)

*Knowledge, Resources, and Decisions about College*

The negative educational identities students formed during high school prevented them from considering college attendance, and even prevented some from finishing high school. The few participants who did think that they had the skills necessary to attend college reported that they lacked knowledge about how to apply and enroll in college. For example, Cheryl believed she was "college material," but she was afraid of asking questions about how to apply and enroll in college. She explained,

> I tell you what, I remember coming out of high school thinking, "Nobody told me what to do." Maybe it was because I didn't ask the questions, maybe it was because I didn't go to the meetings, but I specifically was very ignorant about college. By that point in my life, I was afraid to ask a lot of questions for fear of looking stupid, which was dumb because I could of, but I was afraid to and I did not know how to go about going to college. I knew I was college material, because I was in the classes with the college kids, but they all seemed to know what was going on and they seemed to know already, and I think that little gap that I had there of changing schools and not going to school for a little while, I think that made a difference. I think there were probably things that I missed that would have helped me. (Cheryl–white female, age 53)

Cheryl was afraid to ask questions for a fear of "looking stupid." Interestingly, Cheryl lived in a group home during high school. Cheryl described several incidences of harassment and discrimination she faced during high school because of where she lived. This resulted in her feeling disillusioned by high school, even though she generally considered herself academically competent.

> There was a backlash and that was probably a large part of my disillusionment. There was a backlash from the dean of women and the vice principal. They assumed when I got there that I was going to be a poor student, that I was going to be disruptive, that I was going to be a problem, that I was going to be having sex in the bathrooms. You could tell right away. They brought me in to enroll me and there was just discrimination from the get-go because of where I lived. (Cheryl–white female, age 53)

By the time Cheryl was ready to think about college, she felt "ignorant" of how to go about attending college.

> And part of it was my ignorance, too. I really had missed something in that window in sophomore year where they really start helping you go to college. I missed it, I missed something, and I always felt ignorant. I always felt everybody else knew something I didn't know. (Cheryl–white female, age 53)

Although many improvements had been made in the opportunity to attend college, inequality existed for those from low-income families and racial/ethnic minority groups (Jones 2013; Perna and Kurban 2013; Thayer 2000). College enrollment of recent high school graduates remains stratified by family income, with students from high-income families attending at higher rates than those from low-income families (Perna and Kurban 2013). The inequality in college enrollment by family income had increased in recent years. The percentage of low-income students who did not enroll in college increased from 20 percent not attending in 1992 to 23 percent not attending in 2004 (Perna and Kurban 2013).

Academic preparation and achievement was one of the areas identified by researchers as influencing the decision to attend college (Perna and Kurban 2013). Not surprisingly, those who had low academic achievement in high school were less likely to enroll in college. But, the students who graduated with low academic preparation and achievement tended to be groups underrepresented in higher education, such as first-generation college students, those from low-income families, and those from African

American and Hispanic families (Perna and Kurban 2013). However, even accounting for academic ability, low-income students with high academic achievement are less likely to attend college than are students from higher-income families (Thayer 2000).

According to Perna and Kurban (2013), much less research has been dedicated to the role of peers on college enrollment decisions; however, the research completed showed that college enrollment increased for those whose friends planned to attend college: The effect was greater for students from low-income, urban, and minority families than for other students. The narratives analyzed in this research also highlighted the importance of peer relationships in the college enrollment decision. The students interviewed pointed to peer relationships as one of the factors that influenced their disengagement in high school. For some, it was association with others like themselves who had to work and did not plan to continue education to college. For others, social relationships were imposed on them by the school culture. Either way, the result was that students became less engaged in academics and more focused on social issues.

Perna and Kurban (2013) presented a model for understanding students' decision to enroll in college based on a synthesis of prior research on the subject. The model was built on human capital theory, which predicts that students make decisions based on their perceptions of rewards and costs. The assumption is that students decide about college enrollment based on a rational comparison of perceived costs and perceived benefits. The costs identified include tuition and forgone earnings, while the benefits identified include potential higher future earnings and unspecified nonmonetary benefits. Social context is included in the model by calling attention to the fact that decisions are made based on differences in a person's social environment. The social context includes four layers: the

personal habitus; the school and community context; the higher education context; and the social, economic, and political context.

The narratives in the current study demonstrated that one contributing factor to the decision not to enroll in college directly after high school was the negative educational identities formed during early educational experiences. This particular reason fell mostly into the personal habitus context as identified by the model. The habitus includes personal thoughts and beliefs learned in the personal environment. For example, in a survey of adults about the feasibility of pursuing a college degree in adulthood, Mbilinyi (2006) found that those who had not attended college were more likely than those with a college degree to have received the message that they were not "college material" from someone when they were growing up. These kinds of messages within the school context influenced students' beliefs about who they were, including messages about belongingness, within the educational environment.

The link between educational identities and educational decision-making was visible in other studies. In a study of adult students who left public schooling with no intention of continuing their education, Webb (2001) focused on the link between educational identity and decision-making processes related to education. Findings identified three educational narratives formed during previous educational experiences: access denied, untapped potential, and wasted potential.

Students who believed higher education was not an option for them at the time they left schooling expressed the "access denied" educational identity. The students did not attribute their lack of progress to higher education as their own deficit, but rather as from institutional practices and as articulated by teachers and parents. Webb (2001)

concluded that educational narratives played a prominent role in students' educational decision-making. The educational narratives interacted with experiences, employment, and families in unique ways, demonstrating that institutional, dispositional, and situational factors interacted in complex ways.

The narratives I analyzed demonstrated how students inhabited and interpreted the organizational habitus of the school, including messages from teachers, and formulated thoughts about their abilities and aptitudes with the educational environment, their educational identities. The habitus could limit the information available and students' perceptions about higher education. They believed that the college environment would be more of the same of high school experience, and they did not want to repeat the experience encountered in high school.

## A NEGATIVE CASE: POSITIVE EXPERIENCES AND EDUCATIONAL IDENTITIES

One participant, Rachel, represented an exception to the findings discussed above. Rachel attended elementary school and high school in Mexico and reported very different schooling experiences than those described by the other participants. Rachel's family life was similar to those of the other participants. They struggled financially, and she was one of ten children raised by a single mom. However, in contrast to the experiences of those who attended school in the United States, Rachel described her early schooling experiences in positive terms.

> It was great; I think the schools in Mexico are a lot harder than here. A lot of homework. You have to really. . . And we don't get multiple choice tests. You have to actually write the answer, write it down. (Rachel–Hispanic female, age 36)

Rachel remembered a specific time during elementary school when she made a promise at school that she would one day attend college. She stated that she never forgot that promise.

> I remember I signed a paper when I was six, that I promised my mom I was going to enroll into college. . . . I was six years old and I committed to do that. I signed. It was like a contract. (Rachel–Hispanic female, age 36)

Rachel described her high school experience in Mexico as having a different focus than high schools in the United States. In Mexico, high schools focused on vocational training. Rachel trained as an executive assistant and especially enjoyed taking English classes. She explained that high school focused on hard work, and that respect for teachers was important at the school and to her. This focus on hard work helped her decide to enroll in college now.

> I think that's where I got. . . . Because of high school, that's why I decided to enroll here. That's where I got the training. Typing and working hard with homework and all that stuff. That's one of the things that helped me to get into college here in the U.S. They're [her high school] very strict and they do get a lot of practice and all kinds of stuff that helps you. (Rachel–Hispanic female, age 36)

The positive experiences Rachel had during her early educational experiences led her to describe herself as a learner who was "hard working" and "dedicated." The reason she did not attend college directly after high school was that her family did not have the money for her to attend college. She found that work was a priority so she could help out her mom at home.

> I wanted to [go to college] but we didn't have the money. . . . I knew I wasn't going to do it at the time. When I graduated, I started working after that. . . . I guess I needed to start working to help out. I was single at the time. So I kind of just. . . . I had a good job after I graduated. (Rachel–Hispanic female, age 36)

Rachel's high school experiences contrasted with the experiences described by students who attended in the United States because she described her educational identity

in positive terms. After high school, Rachel worked for pay to help her family financially, but she never forgot her promise to attend college.

## SUMMARY

Research Question 1 sought to understand the role of early educational experiences in shaping a student's educational identity and the effect of the experiences on early decisions concerning college enrollment and attendance. Through analysis of the narratives of 15 adult, first-generation college students, two findings emerged.

Participants described negative early educational experiences, particularly in high school. Difficult educational experiences were often related to actions taken or not taken within educational institutions. Learning disabilities went unrecognized, bullying was ignored, and social status was reinforced through the actions and inaction of school representatives. By high school, a majority of those interviewed used negative terminology to describe themselves as learners. They had internalized the messages learned in school. The reasons participants gave for not attending college directly after high school often related to the negative experiences in educational institutions.

Students discussed feeling disengaged from the curriculum and having a strong focus on social relationships during high school, leading them to internalize feelings of not belonging in an educational environment. Instead of considering college, participants joined the workforce, had children, or were married. After leaving high school, they were able to focus on other aspects of their lives. Then, after many years away from educational institutions, the participants made a decision to enroll in and attend college. The social forces that led to this decision and experiences in college are the focus of the next chapter.

# CHAPTER V:

# FINDINGS PART II:

# SOCIAL SHIFTS LEADING TO COLLEGE ENROLLMENT LATER IN LIFE

The findings discussed in this chapter relate to the decision to enroll in college as adults. The previous chapter contained analysis of the findings related to early educational experiences, the formation of educational identities, and the decision to not enroll in college directly after high school. The focus of this chapter is on the second research question introduced at the beginning of this dissertation. This question sought to explore the life experiences, or changes in the field, that created a shift in dispositions and led to enrollment in college later in life. The findings and interpretation are based on 15 in-depth interviews with adult, first-generation college students. To provide a broad range of perspectives from the participants in this study, representative quotations from the narratives are provided for each finding. The descriptive quotations portray the similarities and variety within the participants' narratives. The overall intent is to describe and explain the social construction of educational identities from the standpoint of participants.

## SOCIAL SHIFTS LEADING TO COLLEGE ENROLLMENT LATER IN LIFE

When adult, first-generation students were asked about the life experiences that led to college enrollment later in life, two major findings arose from the narratives. First,

a majority (13 of 15; 87 percent) of the participants reported a job-related incident or reason for enrolling in college as an adult. In addition to job-related life circumstances that led to college enrollment, two-thirds (10 of 15; 67 percent) of participants described their decision to enroll in college as a response to feeling tired of struggling with financial difficulties. Second, a majority (14 of 15; 93 percent) of participants described receiving support and encouragement from significant members of their family or friends about their enrollment in college.

Deciding to enroll in and attend college was a developmental process for most participants. The amount of time participants took to decide to enroll in college ranged from a few hours to 30 years, with 8 of 15; 53 percent reporting that the decision required between 1 and 5 years. The quickest decision to enroll in college came from Sally, who turned in her uniform after being fired from her job and found herself sitting in her car, crying, in the parking lot of a community college. She immediately went into the college and began enrollment procedures. The longest period for a participant to decide to enroll in college was from Cheryl, who waited until her six children were grown and finally decided it was the right time to enroll in college. For half the participants, the decision took place over 1 to 5 years. It was often spurred by a specific job-related event, but also involved discussions with significant others and financial preparations. The following discussion outlines the findings and provides specific examples demonstrating trends in the narratives.

## JOB INSTABILITY, FINANCIAL STRUGGLES, AND COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

A majority (13 of 15; 87 percent) of the participants reported a job-related incident as a reason for enrolling in college as an adult. In addition to job-related life

circumstances that led to college enrollment, two-thirds (10 of 15; 67 percent) of participants described their decision to enroll in college as a response to feeling tired of struggling with financial difficulties. Because the participants in this study did not attend college directly after high school, they primarily worked for pay, married, and started a family. Sometime during their adulthood, between the ages of 30 and 59, they decided to enroll in college. At the time of the interview, students were within the first year (24 credit hours) of their college attendance. Participants had recently made the decision to enroll in and attend college, and the circumstances surrounding this decision were still fresh in their memories. The decision to enroll in college was prompted by a job-related life event for a majority (13 of 15; 87 percent) of the participants. Job-related life events described by participants included job loss, disability, and general job dissatisfaction. In addition to these job-related life circumstances, two-thirds (10 of 15; 67 percent) described their decision to enroll in college as a response to feeling tired of struggling with financial difficulties.

*Job Loss and College Enrollment*

The reason adult, first-generation college students enrolled in and attended college later in life was primarily job-related. Job-related reasons for enrolling in college included job loss, disability, and job dissatisfaction. When the reason for enrolling in college was a job loss, participants often explained that they did not dwell on the difficulty of the situation, but rather used the experience as an opportunity to enroll in college. Robert and Sally offered examples of how participants who were dismissed from their jobs decided to enroll in college. Robert found himself without a job after being fired from a job he loved at a local hospital. He explained the experience:

> My last job, I worked at the [local hospital] for almost three years and I got fired from there. Actually I wasn't mad, I really wasn't. A lot of people would be really furious when they get fired, but it was an awakening for me. Once I got fired, and of course, I was confused and I just prayed, and I'm like, "Lord, what do you want me to do? I'm lost, I'm confused right now. Do you want me to go to school, do you want me to get another job, a different job, what do you want me to do?" He pushed me to go to school, go to school. (Robert–African American male, age 41)

Like Robert, Sally was spurred to enroll in college immediately after being fired from her job at a local convenience store. She described how she turned in her uniform, and then drove directly to the parking lot of the local community college:

> I got in my car, and when I stopped driving, this is where I ended up. I went, "Well, okay." I got out of the car and I came in here, downstairs, and I was crying. I said I don't know what to do. I want to get back into school and I don't know how. The guy said, "First of all. quit crying, take this paper, go over there, if you did . . ." Because I stopped at every little stop, because they don't tell you what to do. So I stopped at every little stop and he said, "Actually you're ahead of the game. We just need to test you." When I got done, he said I tested out of most of everything that I needed to get into college. I said, "Oh there's a problem, I don't have a high school diploma." He said, "By your test scores that's not a problem. You need to do 30 credit hours and you've got your diploma." I went, shut the door. After this semester, I'll be one credit hour away from having 30 credit hours, then I'll have my diploma. Since then, I've gotten two [state] grants for my grades and . . . (Sally–white female, age 35)

Both Robert and Sally described an experience in which they were fired from their jobs. They used the experience to make a major change in their lives by enrolling in college. Later, Robert explained that losing his job was not an isolated event, but rather a "wake-up call" that he needed to make a major change in his life. Robert described explaining the situation to his mom:

> I said, "I believe this is a wakeup call." I said, "I'm thirty-something, almost forty." I said, "I can't keep going job to job to job to job, I've been doing this too long." I said, "It's time to do something," and I said, "I'm thinking about going to school, thinking about enrolling in college." (Robert–African American male, age 41)

Robert's narrative indicated that the job loss was not an isolated event in his life. The loss was part of a pattern of job changes that eventually accumulated, reaching the point when he decided to return to school. The job loss that spurred his enrollment was described as an opportunity to make a change in his life.

The theme of viewing a negative job-related event as an opportunity was present in the narratives of other students. Another job-related incident that led to college enrollment was disability. Some participants decided to enroll in college after suffering injuries on the job that left them unable to perform job duties. Like those who experienced a job loss, those who suffered injuries framed the experience as an opportunity. Mark's narrative provided a good example of this phenomenon. He described his decision to enroll in college after suffering an accident at work. Rather than dwell on the difficulty of the injury he suffered, he viewed the situation as an opportunity, even explaining that he was "thankful" that the injury happened.

> I worked in a distribution warehouse and I really kind of got comfortable with where I was at, and I was able to pay my bills, and I just kept putting off school, putting it off. And [I] had an injury and I think it's kind of a blessing in a way that it happened, because it finally has really given me an opportunity to go back to school, knowing that I can't go back to the same line of work that I used to do. . . . I was a fork lift operator and it required a lot of lifting and stuff. Even though I do drive, but I'm not going to be able to go back into that field, so I'm going back, trying to use my brain again. [chuckle] I'm really thankful that it did happen when it did and not happen later on in life, to maybe where I wouldn't have really wanted to come back. (Mark–bi-racial male, age 41)

*Job Dissatisfaction and College Enrollment*

Job loss and disability were both immediate circumstances that prompted enrollment in college, although, like Robert, generally they were a final incident after a series of job-related disappointments. In addition to job loss and disability, another job-

related reason for enrolling in college was a general dissatisfaction with past or current employment. Rather than a specific event that spurred enrollment, some participants described years of job dissatisfaction that finally reached a tipping point. Amy's narrative provided an example of this theme. She explained that during her adult life, she accepted any job she could find to support herself. After many years of working jobs she "hated," she decided that she needed to return to school to find a job that she liked.

> I've done about everything. It's been so hard, like the economy and stuff, I just really basically took the first job that came by, and unfortunately those jobs are call center jobs. I hated them and hated them, but I had to have the money, so I would take them. . . . So that kind of led me into coming into school too, because it was around the same time. So, basically, call center. I've done some medical records, some banking, fast food, right after high school. (Amy–white female, age 33)

Sometimes, general job dissatisfaction was heightened by a specific incident that prompted enrollment. Anna explained that her decision to return to college was related to an overall feeling of dissatisfaction with her job; however, her job dissatisfaction was combined with a specific incident at work when a coworker called her a racial slur. The combination of general job dissatisfaction with a specific incident led her to enroll in college.

> I didn't like where I was at basically. . . . It's an unfortunate way that it came about because I was at a place and there was an altercation at work, so one of the other women had called me a racial [name]. She had made a racial comment to me, and there was no punishment, there was no discipline or action or anything. I was disappointed in the physicians and that was it. I was, like, I had lost complete respect for that office and for the doctors because the doctors were the ones who had to have a meeting to discuss whether she was to be dismissed or whatever, because that was a racist comment that she made. Then once that was done and they didn't do it [discipline her], I guess due to money-wise, they were like, "Well, we need to keep her because she's able to do this and this and this for this amount of pay raise, because we don't want to hire a technician that is registered in this area, because we're actually paying her cheaper than we would pay for [someone new.]" . . . So when all that wording started coming around, hearing this and that, I was just like, you know what, I stand more than that, and I'm

> going to do it. I'm going back to school and I'm going to do something, and when they later find out about me, they're going to be like, "Man, she went to school and she finished and . . ." I was like, I've got to do something, and so that's how I just started, or thought of coming back to school. (Anna–Hispanic female, age 30)

Amy and Anna offered examples of how job dissatisfaction led them to enroll in college. For Amy, general job dissatisfaction accumulated to a tipping-point without a specific incident to prompt college enrollment. In contrast, Anna described general job dissatisfaction amplified by a specific incident at work.

The majority of participants describe job-related reasons for enrolling in college as adults. When the reason was not job-related, the decision was based on a significant life change, as in the case of Joseph. Joseph explained that he decided to return to school after entering a drug abuse recovery program. He had been involved in the recovery program for three years and still lived in a house for those in recovery.

> I've been involved in a long-term recovery program. So I've been in an in-house recovery program. That's given me the opportunity to really focus on what I want to do with my future and get my head cleared and get focused on what was coming up next. I thought about college before that. But as the time approached where it was allowed for me to make a decision about what I wanted to do, I just pulled the trigger and said I need to go to school because I have an opportunity to do it. It was more of me being in my right place at the right time. So I went for it. (Joseph–white male, age 38)

The narratives of these first-generation, adult students demonstrated that job-related issues played a significant role in their decisions to enroll in college later in life. For many, the need for a new job or career was necessary because of a job loss or disability. Moreover, the loss of a job or the inability to continue working in their previous profession was often viewed in a positive light. Enrolling in college was an opportunity to find a new type of job or career.

*Financial Struggle and College Enrollment*

Even though participants were often able to point to a specific incident that led to college enrollment, the incident often acted as facilitator to make a change after many years of job dissatisfaction and financial struggle. In addition to a job-related reason, two-thirds (10 of 15; 67 percent) of participants described their decision to enroll in college as a response to feeling tired of struggling with financial difficulties. As students told their stories, the decision to enroll in college was clearly related to the combination of a lifetime of financial struggle and more immediate job-related needs.

Many participants detailed the many years of financial struggle and their unwillingness to continue the struggle. This unwillingness to struggle anymore was often combined with a disappointment they felt at a perceived lack of accomplishment in their lives. College enrollment provided a new chance to overcome a lifetime of financial struggle, provide a more stable income and benefits for their family, and rise above an overall feeling of failure.

Diane and Cheryl both described their decision to attend college as motivated by a desire to overcome a lifetime of financial difficulties. Diane explained that her health was better after a successful surgery, allowing her to "do something" to alleviate the financial struggles she experienced.

> I got better, health-wise, so I could do something. I was just tired of being poor. . . . But I was just tired of struggling. I don't want to be rich, but I want to be able, if I want something, I'll go to the store and buy it. (Diane–Native American female, age 48)

Cheryl explained that enrolling in college was part of an accumulation of many years of financial struggle.

> We had been experiencing some financial difficulties for some time. . . . I'm 53, so I probably should have made some decisions before that, but I hadn't. I didn't have the confidence, and to be honest, even when I started, I didn't have the confidence. I just plunged in because I had a daughter-in-law who was essentially a professional student and said, "You can do this.". . . It was just the time; it was just time. I think I just recognized that I could just keep going on like I was or I could make a different decision, and I had done that many times. . . (Cheryl–white female, age 53)

Often the need to relieve financial struggles was related to concerns for providing stability for the participants' families. Eva discussed that she was prompted to enroll in college because she had become a single parent and needed to make a better wage for her family. After experiencing stagnation in her current job, she recognized that attaining a college degree meant that she would be more likely to advance in her career.

> Becoming a single mother. Needing to make that pay scale a little higher for me and having that college degree just kind of helps push it through a little bit. . . . For instance, the job that I had, I was at for seven years. I covered five different positions, but someone who had a college degree got that supervisor's position over me because I didn't have that degree. Of course, I had to train that supervisor because she had no clue. But it's the point that she had that degree. So yeah, that's a big motivator. . . . But then when you start getting older and things really start mattering, as far as having an income and a savings and life insurance for your kids, and health insurance, that's when you see you want to advance more into these companies and know what you're doing. And that degree really helps. . . . But, you would still get passed over because you didn't have that college behind you. It hurt. (Eva–Hispanic female, age 39)

Likewise, Alex reported that his need to provide financial stability for his family prompted his decision to return to school; however, he also discussed a sense of frustration with himself for not providing more for his family up to the time of college enrollment.

> Leading up to enrolling, my circumstances were, hatred of the job I had, hatred of me being roughly a middle-aged guy and I've accomplished nothing. So leading up to enrollment, I was really mad at myself. Not necessarily mad at the circumstances because I'm the one that created that. We're not struggling, we're not hurting, my kids are eating, they've got nice clothes, but knowing that I'm 37 and have accomplished nothing; it was basically I was mad at myself. Knowing

> that my wife deserves more, my kids deserve more, and me not giving it to them. So, leading up to this point, motivation was so high to be that guy that I haven't been. (Alex–white male, age 37)

Kasworm et al. (2002) reviewed the literature on reasons adult students entered or returned to college. Motivations for why adult students enroll in college are highly complex and evolving as students enter and begin taking classes. Initially, adult students provide a work- or career-related reason for pursing a college degree, but such reasons are often paired with other motivations related to self-perception and identity. The researchers described three categories of motivations that led an adult to enroll in college: (1) personal transitions and change, (2) proactive life planning, and (3) a mixture of personal transition and proactive planning.

Adult students who enrolled due to personal transitions might have been reacting to a job-related need or to another significant life change, such as divorce. Those who enrolled in college because of proactive life planning were more purposeful in their desire to make a change in their lives. Kasworm et al. (2002) explained that such individuals were not simply reacting to an outside event, but they had planned out making the change in their life that led to college enrollment.

The third category of motivation to enroll in college was a mixture of personal transitions and proactive life planning. According to Kasworm et al. (2002), adult students who had attended college for at least a year tended to discuss their motivations using a mixture of personal transitions and proactive life planning. The adult students might have begun college with a single reason, such as job loss. But as they reflected on their motivations to enroll in college, they tended to revise their stated motives to reflect

more complex motivations and goals. Many adult students mentioned three to six personal transition and proactive reasons for enrolling in college.

The narratives analyzed in this study reflected the complexity of what led first-generation, adult students to enroll in college. When asked about their decision to enroll in a college degree program as adults, the participants often offered job-related reasons compounded by years of financial struggle and a desire to provide stability for themselves and their families. The decision might have been prompted by a specific job loss, but was amplified when combined with many years of disappointing jobs and low incomes. Both personal transition and proactive planning motivations were present in their narratives about the decision to enroll in college. However, one other important component affected their decision to enroll in and attend college. The decision to enroll in college was influenced and supported by at least one significant person in their social network.

## ENCOURAGEMENT, SUPPORT, AND COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

A majority (14 of 15; 93 percent) of participants described receiving support and encouragement from a significant member of their family or friends concerning their enrollment in college. Encouragement and support from a significant person were important elements in the decision to enroll in college. A majority (14 of 15; 93 percent) of participants in this study described specific encouragement and general support from family and friends for their decision to enroll in college.

As students contemplated college enrollment, the difficulties experienced in early educational institutions continued to affect students' educational identities. The encouragement and support received often played an important role in assuaging self-

doubts and anxieties about their educational abilities and the college environment more generally. Encouragement and support came from many different sources, including parents, children, spouses, friends, and neighbors. The following examples from participant narratives demonstrated the importance of such support to first-generation, adult college students.

*Support for College Enrollment from Family*

Parents of first-generation, adult college students often offered an important and significant source of support. The parents had not attended college themselves and were sometimes surprised by their adult child's decision; however, they often offered emotional support and expressed happiness about the decision. Cassie and Robert offered examples of the importance of parental support. Cassie struggled with bullying and a learning disability during all of her early educational experiences. By the time she was in high school, she said she "just gave up" on academics. Because of all the troubles she had in previous educational institutions, she did not expect to receive parental support for her decision to enroll in college. Cassie explained that her parents were understandably worried about her entering another educational institution, but soon they became supportive and proud of her choice to enroll in college:

> I had a lot of support. I didn't think I was going to have a lot of support from my mom and dad after they found out that I applied for the Pell grant and coming to school, but it's a whole different story. It's just like, their eyes lit up, they're smiling from ear to ear. It's like, "Okay. It's your choice; it's not ours." (Cassie–white female, age 32)

Robert also described receiving support from his mother about his decision to enroll in college. Robert's educational experiences during high school were heavily

focused on peer relationships. He did not see himself as "college material." As an adult, once he thought about enrolling in college, the first person he called was his mother.

> Me and my mom have a really close relationship. Of course, I'm the baby and she's 800 miles from me here, but we have a really close relationship. I talk to her constantly on the phone, and once I got fired, I talked to her, told her about the decision. . . . It was mind-blowing to her because she never thought that I would go to college. Like I said, it never crossed my mind once in high school, even after I graduated and went door to door, it never crossed my mind to go to college, mainly because I didn't think that I was college material, by me being the person that I was in high school; middle school and high school, I can't do college, I make F's. There's no way. . . Well, the thought occurred that if I try college, maybe I'd be good at it, if I gave myself a chance to actually learn. Whereas in high school, I never gave it a chance, so I didn't know what I had in me. (Robert–African American male, age 41)

Robert had already started to question the previously held definition of himself as not "college material." He wondered if maybe he could be good at college, if only he tried. His mother's support and pride in his decision helped him make the cognitive shift.

Another important source of support and encouragement came from participants' children, including both minor children and adult children. Parents of young children often described how their children provided motivation for them to make this change in their lives. Additionally, young children were often encouraging and supportive of their parent's decision to attend college. These words from Eva provided an example of the role children played in encouraging and supporting their parent's college enrollment.

> My kids have been really supportive. And they've really pushed for me to do this. . . . Go for it, Mom! And I know what I'm doing as far as the coding. It's just you have to have that degree to get anywhere with it. . . . So my kids are a big motivation in my life. And now that I've got two stepchildren and they're seeing me go back to school, the eight-year-old is like, "Wow. . . I cannot believe you're doing this and you're 40!" [Laughs] I'm like, thanks. (Eva–Hispanic female, age 39)

Adult children also provided encouragement and support for their parents to enroll in college. Kimberly described the support she received from her adult children, who attended the same community college she was attending.

> Of course I was very, very nervous about it, but the kids, especially, encouraged me strongly, because both of them have attended here at [local community college], so they knew it would be a comfortable environment and have been very encouraging through the whole thing. (Kimberly–white female, age 51)

When Kimberly described her high school experience, the first word she used was "yuck." She explained that she felt like an outsider in her high school and believed that teachers showed favoritism based on social status. The support her children gave Kimberly included assurance that the local community college she planned to enroll in would be a "comfortable environment."

Another source of support for first-generation, adult students included spouses. Sometimes the spouses had attended college themselves, and they offered insight into college expectations and navigating the system. Amy offered a good example of how a spouse supported and encouraged a student. Amy received specific encouragement from her husband to attend college. Before his encouragement, Amy believed college would be similar to high school, with uncaring teachers pushing memorization of meaningless information. Her husband dispelled some of the myths about college that kept her from enrolling in and attending college.

> My husband. [Chuckle] He went to [state university], and I've always said, whenever I got out of high school, I was like, I'm never going back to school; I'll never go back to school because it was just a horrible experience. I didn't feel like I really learned like I should. Math was horrible, history, all of that was horrible. He's always told me I need to go back to school. It's not like high school, it's a lot different. You'll realize that the learning techniques and everything are different and you'll learn a lot more and you'll do better because the teachers actually want you to learn, rather than in high school, they just want you to get through. . . But he was like, you have to realize those [high school] teachers were just trying to

> get you through. The teachers in college want you to learn. And he said, "You will notice a big difference." I was like, okay, I'm going to give it a try, I'm going to see how this works, but so far, it's been that way. (Amy–white female, age 33)

Without the insight into the college environment Amy received from her husband, she might never have overcome the messages about educational institutions that she received during her high school experience.

*Support for College Enrollment from Outside the Family*

Sometimes encouragement and support came from outside the family. Several participants discussed the support and encouragement they received from friends, co-workers, neighbors, and even casual acquaintances. The narratives of Anna and Joseph demonstrated how important encouragement from just about any source could help push the adult, first-generation college student towards college enrollment. Anna described her high school as "scary." Social groups based on racial identity were strictly enforced, and Anna lost interest in learning. By the time she graduated from high school, she was pregnant with her first child. Because of her pregnancy, she believed she would never be able to attend college. She did not realize that people could have children and attend college. Knowing someone enrolled in college and encouragement from her co-workers helped Anna believe that she could attend college.

> A couple of people. I've got a friend that is actually at [a local college] and she started and she kept saying, "You know, you should go back to school, go back to school." And also, I had a friend that I was working with at one of the clinics and she was like, "You should go back to school," because she would hear me say, "I don't know, I think that would kind of be cool." And then a lot of the physicians, too, told me, they were like, "You know too much to be just a medical assistant." They were like, "You should go into nursing. You're young, and even though you have two kids, you should pursue it." And so I started getting more feedback from people, to where I was like, you know what, I think I can do this, why not. (Anna–Hispanic female, age 30)

Anna began to believe she could "do this" after encouragement from people she knew and worked with, including physicians, whose rank distinguished them as having completed many years of schooling. Joseph also found encouragement from someone who was perceived to have important insight into academic life. Joseph described a specific experience he had at a church function where he found himself in a conversation with a professor from a local private college:

> Yeah. I think the significant event that happened was I was reading a book about education and I didn't know. . . We were having this conversation, with these people I had never met, at a church thing I was going to. They started talking about education and I brought in my stuff and that stuff. When I finished, my buddy . . . was like, "You know who you were talking to?" No. He goes, "You were talking to five professors." . . . I was like, really? And they thought I was a professor because how I was conversing with them and how I was holding my own with them. One of them was like, "So where do you teach at?" I'm like, "I don't." He's like, "What's your degree?" "I haven't gone to school yet**."** He looked me right in my face and goes, "If you don't go to school somewhere, then you're wasting your potential." Alright, that's all I needed to hear. Let's go. (Joseph–white male, age 38)

Joseph also describes receiving encouragement from his friends:

> Like, a couple of people I know who were already in it [college]. I went and saw one of my friends graduate from [a local college]. That was pretty exciting. They would always just give me garbage about it. They're like, "You're one of the smartest people we know. Why aren't you in college?" "I don't know. I don't think I can do it." They're like, "Shut up." They would tell me, "Shut up, enroll, you're more than capable of doing it." So I was like, "Fine, I'll go up and take the little placement tests." They're like, "Yeah, you can enroll any time you want." (Joseph–white male, age 38)

Earlier in the interview, Joseph had described all of his early educational experiences using words like "horrible" and "hated school." He stated that he was often in trouble, that the learning lacked meaning, and that he did not believe he belonged. The constant pushing from his friends to attend college followed by an acknowledgement of

his academic potential by a professor was enough for Joseph to overcome previous messages about education.

*A Negative Case: No Clear Source of Encouragement or Support*

One potentially important note was that one participant interviewed (Diane–Native American female, age 48) reported she did not receive encouragement or support to attend college. Diane experienced bullying throughout her early schooling years and did not graduate from high school. She described herself as an "outcast" during her early educational experiences. She decided to enroll in college after a successful surgery changed her disability status, allowing her physical movement and the possibility of meaningful work. After years of financial struggle, she decided she needed to do something different with her life.

Originally, she was going to attend college classes with her daughter, but her daughter backed out at the last minute. Diane also had a minor son living with her, who she said suffered from bullying like she did in school. She did not believe either of her children had the ability to offer encouragement or support for her college enrollment. Diane reported that she took care of her aging mother, who had abused and neglected her as a child. The only possible area of support for Diane might have been from a rehabilitation counselor, but whether Diane saw this person as a source of support was unclear. Diane joined a college leadership organization and became very involved in the group, even flying to another state to attend a national conference. From the interview, it seemed that, through this college group, Diane found support after she began attending college.

Overall, the decision to enroll in and attend college was influenced primarily by two sources: (1) job-related concerns that were often an accumulation of years of dissatisfaction and financial struggle and (2) encouragement and support from a significant person. Job-related concerns were one of the forces that led adult, first-generation students to consider college education. The work-related need was augmented by encouragement and support that helped the participants overcome some of the educational messages they received in early educational experiences.

Mbilinyi (2006) found that the most common reported influence for adults pursuing additional education was a spouse or partner, and the second most common reported influence was children. Fewer adults in the survey identified a boss or supervisor as a source of support for returning to education. According to Mbilinyi (2006), 79 percent of adult college graduates reported they received encouragement to attend college, whereas only 16 percent of non-college graduates said they received encouragement to attend college.

In a review of the literature on adult college students, Kasworm et al. (2002) listed family roles and responsibilities as an important influence on adult students' decisions to enroll in college. Part of the influence of family included adult students' perceptions of being able to commit to college work in addition to their family responsibilities. Such a commitment can require renegotiation of family roles and responsibilities. The other part of the influence of family on the decision to enroll in college was support from spouses or family. Receiving support for college enrollment had a large impact on the adult student's confidence, commitment, and persistence.

As discussed in the literature review, conflict between family culture and the culture of higher education was identified as a potential challenge for first-generation college students. However, Zwerling (1992) challenged this assumption for first-generation, adult students. He claimed that the cultural tensions identified in previous studies of first-generation college students was greatly reduced for *adult*, first-generation college students. Instead, he noted that adult students were often encouraged by friends, family, work associates, their own children, and spouses to enroll in college. The same conclusion could be drawn from the narratives of the first-generation, adult students in this study. Support and encouragement from significant others was an important factor in the decision to enroll in college.

The role of support from family and other sources might be even more important to the persistence of low-income, first-generation, adult students. Adult students were more likely to persist in college if they had parents with college experience, past positive experiences in college, strong academic abilities, limited family demands, financial resources to cover college expenses, and support from their family or significant others (Kasworm et al. 2002). For many of the participants in the current research, the only factor they had to increase their likelihood of success was the support of a significant person in their life, making the support that much more important to their academic success and persistence. The unavailability of encouragement and support may be a determining factor in adults who need to enroll in college for job-related factors, but do not do so.

In a study similar to the present research, Moore (2006) analyzed the life-history narratives of first-generation, adult students in Finland. The reasons students did not

attend university earlier in life were briefly discussed as structural, financial, or geographical limitations. Rather, the analysis focused on what led the students to attend college as adults and the educational identity transformations that occurred as a result. Similar to the participants in the current study, Moore found that adult students were motivated to enroll in college because of unrewarding work that left them feeling unsatisfied. Additionally, the students were influenced by significant others who helped change their thinking about enrolling in college. Some of the significant others held university degrees. The association with these people changed the way the adults thought about their own educational possibilities.

The troubling early educational experiences described by participants in this study raised the question of how these students would navigate the new educational territory they entered as adults and as first-generation college students. The students were pushed to find new employment opportunities through often unplanned life-circumstances. They chose to attend college as a way to find employment that was more stable and more satisfying. The third research question remains: whether the college environment reinforced participants' previously held beliefs about themselves or offered an opportunity for first-generation adult college students to re-invent beliefs about their educational aptitude.

# CHAPTER VI:

# FINDINGS PART III:

# (RE)ALIGNING EDUCATIONAL IDENTITIES IN THE COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT

The purpose of this research was to investigate how educational identities were formed and transformed within educational institutions over the lifespan, and how the identities were related to decisions about education. Chapter IV contained an analysis of the findings that related to early educational experiences, the formation of educational identities, and the decision to not enroll in college directly after high school. The focus of Chapter V was on the decision to enroll in college as an adult. This chapter, Chapter VI, addresses the third research question in this study. The findings and interpretations were based on 15 in-depth interviews with adult, first-generation college students. To provide a broad range of perspectives from the participants in the study, representative quotations from the narratives are provided for each finding. The descriptive quotations portray the similarities and variety within the participants' narratives. The overall intent was to describe and explain the social construction of educational identities from the standpoint of participants.

The findings discussed in this chapter related to educational identity transformations within the field of higher education. The best means to explore transformations over the lifespan was through in-depth life-history interviews. This

process uncovered the complex factors that influenced self-perception transformations over time.

## (RE)ALIGNING EDUCATIONAL IDENTITIES IN THE COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT

Research Question 3 sought to understand how students (re)aligned educational identities developed in early educational experiences with their new roles as college students and how the culture of higher education supported or detracted from the development of positive educational identities. Two findings addressed the third research question. First, all 15 participants (100 percent) expressed feeling fear and anxiety about enrolling in and attending college. To overcome the fear and anxiety about college enrollment, all 15 (100 percent) participants reported they developed a mindset of resistance and adopted behavioral strategies to promote success in the higher education environment. Second, all 15 participants (100 percent) reported positive experiences in college that helped change their perspectives of themselves and of education. All 15 (100 percent) also reported that enrollment in college led to positive educational identities such as improved self-concept (15 of 15; 100 percent), renewed joy of learning (14 of 15; 93 percent), and new experiences and knowledge (11 of 15; 73 percent).

## EDUCATIONAL IDENTITIES AND EMOTIONS: FEAR, ANXIETY, AND EXCITEMENT

All 15 participants (100 percent) expressed feeling fear and anxiety about enrolling in and attending college. To overcome the fear and anxiety about college enrollment, all 15 (100 percent) participants reported they developed a mindset of resistance and applied behavioral strategies to promote success in the higher education environment. That enrollment in college created fear and anxiety among first-generation,

adult college students was not surprising. Many participants avoided enrolling in college earlier in life because of troubled experiences in school and educational identities that were not aligned with college enrollment. Now, life circumstances impelled them to decide that a college degree was the best way to provide more stable and fulfilling employment options.

The perceived needs and desires to attend college did not erase doubts the participants previously might have held about their academic abilities. The students often carried such beliefs with them through the enrollment process and the first several weeks of classes. All participants interviewed in this study reported feeling fear and anxiety about college enrollment and attendance, which they described as nervousness about their ability to perform and general uncertainty about fitting into the college environment. The following excerpts from participant narratives provided details demonstrating the fears about enrolling in and attending college.

*Uncertainty About Academic Abilities*

The need and desire to enroll in and attend college did not automatically change the ways adult, first-generation college students felt about their academic abilities and belongingness in the educational environment. Educational identities developed early in life through difficult schooling experiences often followed students as they entered the college environment, causing uncertainty about their ability to perform in college. Anna, Mark, and Cheryl provided examples of the negative terminology students used to describe themselves during the early college enrollment and attendance period.

> Honestly, I thought I was stupid; like, I came and did the placement test, I did horrible, and after I did that, I was like, "No, oh my gosh, I didn't realize how stupid I was," or blah, blah, blah, but after actually getting in and starting, because even though I had to start . . . Because I knew my math was going to be horrible. I

> knew that was going to be the worst one, and math was my favorite subject all through school: funny. Whenever I actually came and started from the basic math to the beginning, intermediate algebra, and stuff like, that my confidence started building up, because I was, like, "I know this stuff." I'm like, "Why did I not do so good?" And then after I even finished algebra, the basic, I came back and I did my placement test again. And just with that alone, I passed every single one that I had failed prior, which was at the beginning. So I had already taken like three classes, which I was amazed because I was like, "Man, I took three classes and then I come back and take this, and I did awesome in all my testing when I took my placement test again." (Anna–Hispanic female, age 39)

> I thought I didn't want to be the dummy in class. In my class, it seems like maybe there's only one or two of us older students in there, and I just didn't want to be singled out. I kind of, in my mind, was thinking that I was going to fail, for some reason. It's something that I kind of, like, got in the bad habit of always looking at situations and stuff as I was going to fail; I couldn't do it in a way. And I don't feel that way anymore. I feel like now that if I put the time in and do what's required of me in the class, then I won't have any problem passing the class. (Mark–bi-racial male, age 41)

> I was afraid I couldn't do it. I was afraid. At the time, I was working full time and I was really concerned about being able to balance that. There was also a family crisis going on and I was essentially the one carrying the burden of that, and I was really concerned I wouldn't be able to do all of it. It was close, it was really touch and go whether I stayed. I'm telling you, everything conspired to make it so it was too hard to do. (Cheryl–white female, age 53)

*Uncertainty About Belongingness*

A common educational identity developed among the participants during high school, including a feeling of not belonging in the educational institution. The fear of not belonging in the college environment was common among these first-generation, adult college students. Joseph's narrative provided a good example of the link between belongingness concerns in high school translating to belongingness concerns in college. Earlier, Joseph described high school as lacking meaningful learning and reported feeling as though he did not belong. He related a similar concern when discussing his fear during the college enrollment process when he said, "Where does a person like me fit into all this?"

> You see all of the people going around. You see the demographics and the different groups. It's kind of scary, because you're, like, where does a person like me fit into all of this? Where do I go? It was funny, though. I use humor to diffuse a lot of things. I see all these little people walking around in their little groups and I automatically pick TV shows that I think they're trying to imitate. [Laughs] So I'd be like, "Oh it's the Sex and the City group, how nice." [Laughs] When there's a large group of them, I call them the CW. . . . I guess the best way to describe it is culture shock. All the feelings that go along with a culture shock, is the best way I can describe it as a whole experience, is a culture shock. (Joseph–white male, age 38)

Fears about belongingness in the educational environment often centered on age and adult student status, while still having links to early educational identities. Kimberly described her educational identity in high school as feeling like an "outcast." Her major fear the first night of class centered on being one of four adults in her first course. She self-consciously wondered what the younger students must think of her and the other adults.

> The very first night when I sat down in class. I went ohhh . . . . I was freaked. It was like, I'm looking around and I'm going, "Okay, there's four other adults in here," and that was one of my fears: "Am I going to be the only person in class that's an adult?" But I looked around and there were like four other adults and the rest were kids, and you know they have to be wondering, "Why are adults in class? Did they flunk high school? What did they do?" But that was it. The minute that she laid that first assignment on me and said, "Okay, this is where you go for doing your work online," and stuff, and I'm going, how do I get to that program and it's like whoa, I'm in school. I'm 51 years old and I'm in school, this is weird. (Kimberly–white female, age 51)

Often fears and anxieties about enrolling in and attending college included several different factors at the same time. Alex described himself as a "terrible" student during high school who tried to "fly under the radar." When describing his first day of college attendance, he related general anxieties related to his age and preparedness.

> There were a lot of butterflies. It's funny, because I got to school and I'm looking around, and the first thing I texted to my wife was, "Hey, the first thing I've learned my first day of college is" and I kind of left it blank. Then I re-texted her, "is I'm old enough to be all these kids' father." She laughed and giggled. So that

> was my first overall experience, wow. . . . There were a few other older people that you could tell were maybe a little older, but knowing that this should have been me 20 years ago, in a sense, or could have been me, should of, could of, would of kind of thing. But that was the first thing I learned right off the bat, and then you kind of let some butterflies in there when you're going, "I can't believe I'm doing this, am I even ready, can I do this?" You get some doubts that creep in. You can't do this, you haven't studied in 20 years. (Alex–white male, age 37)

*Excited Disbelief*

In spite of the fear and anxiety first-generation, adult students felt about attending college, two-thirds (10 of 15;67 percent) of participants also reported feeling excited anticipation about enrolling in and attending college. Often the feeling of excitement accompanied insecurity and doubt related to high school experiences and early educational identities. Kimberly, Cassie, and Marcy offered good examples of the mix of emotions felt by adult, first-generation college students during the initial days of their enrollment and attendance.

> I was excited. I was nervous, but I was excited. It was like opening up many new doors for me, and the educational experience, I really enjoyed this. I really didn't think I would. I thought it was going to be ho-hum, like it was in high school. (Kimberly–white female, age 51)

> Very excited. My nerves were just going 90 miles an hour, smiling from ear to ear, laughing and crying at the same time because it's so exciting. Seeing my school books, seeing my school ID. All of that made me feel very excited. (Cassie–white female, age 32)

> I was excited. It's a new era, or new chapter in my life, so I was quite excited. I looked forward to it, wasn't sure I could handle it, I'm still not sure I can handle it. [Chuckle] But I'm doing okay. (Marcy–white female, age 37)

Within the excitement Kimberly felt was a sense that she would not enjoy college. This sense was related to her feelings about high school, which she described as "ho-hum." Cassie experienced extreme bullying throughout school, so her excitement was

accompanied by nervousness. While Marcy, who struggled with learning disabilities during elementary school, still was not sure she "can handle it."

Excitement about college attendance and its relationship to early educational identities was demonstrated through descriptions of disbelief that they were "really" or "actually" attending college. Robert and Eva provided good examples of this type of excitement.

> I can't even describe the feeling, because I'm like, wow, this has been 20 years ago, 21 years ago since I've been in school, and now to actually be back in school: It was an awesome feeling, it really was, to actually see the schedule and be like wow, really? I am really in school now, I am going back to school. (Robert–African American male, age 41)

> I was like, wow, I'm really doing this. I went to my medical terminology class to sit there and listen to the teacher lecture, and I'm, like, I can't believe I'm really doing this. I kind of patted myself on the back, because watching my kids go through school and helping them with homework and thinking, wow they're really going to go places. . . And that kind of motivated me too. (Eva–Hispanic female, age 39)

Both Robert and Eva had described high school experiences in which they were academically disengaged. Robert stated that he was "not a school type of person" whereas Eva explained that she did just enough academic work to get by and graduate. College attendance was counter to the educational identities the participants developed through early educational experiences, so students reacted with excited disbelief.

While some research studies focused on academic preparation issues related to first-generation college students (Terenzini et al. 1996) and first-generation, adult college students (Byrd and MacDonald 2005), few studies delved into the complex emotions that accompany enrolling in college for the first time as a first-generation, adult college student. One exception was a study by Moore (2006), who conducted life-history interviews with first-generation, adult college students in Finland to analyze changes in

educational identities within higher education institutions. Moore (2006) found that female students discussed feelings of insecurity about their academic abilities as influenced by early educational experiences; however, the male students did not report the same feeling. Moore did not expand on the ways in which students discussed these insecurities.

Unlike Moore (2006), I did not find any significant gender differences in discussing fears and anxieties related to attending college. The difference might have been related to cultural differences between the two samples or to the questions posed in the interviews. During the interviews, I specifically asked participants to describe their feelings related to college enrollment at three different times. The third time, I asked participants about how feelings from early educational experiences affected current experiences in school. How questions were posed in Moore's (2006) study was unclear, but perhaps women offered information about their feelings more readily than men did when no specific probing about feelings took place, whereas in my study, both women and men offered information about their feelings in response to specific questions about feelings.

In two studies of student identities in college environments, Kasworm (2005; 2010) focused on adult students in at a community college (2005) and at a research university (2010). Both studies conceptualized student identity in terms of positional identity and relational identity. Positional identity included how participants judged themselves as students. In the study with community college adult students, Kasworm (2005) focused primarily on the impact of age on students' beliefs about their competence. In the study with adult students enrolled at a research university, Kasworm

(2010) found that two major themes of positional identity included concerns about gaining acceptance within the college environment and being successful in the classroom. Gaining acceptance was related to age differences with other students in the classroom, and being successful was related to perceived academic weaknesses in a highly competitive environment.

The student narratives described above also demonstrated student concerns about belongingness and academic abilities. In Kasworm's (2005; 2010) research, the impact of age on identity of college students was the major focus. In my dissertation, the focus was on experiences in educational institutions, allowing more variation within the answers. While students often discussed age as a factor related to their feelings, additional factors outside of age also clearly affected fears and anxieties about entering the college environment. For example, Mark briefly mentioned looking for other adult students in class to feel some form of belongingness ("I just didn't want to be singled out"); then he continued to discuss his fear of failure, which in the past had been a habit of thinking when approaching situations. He discussed his decision to stop thinking he would fail to be successful in college. By looking at educational identities from the students' perspectives over the lifespan, we were able to glimpse how emotions were influenced by multiple factors, including past educational experiences and age. The narratives also highlighted the ways in which students confronted such emotions and made cognitive changes to allow for transformations to their educational identity.

All participants reported feeling emotions of fear and anxiety about college enrollment, yet at the time of the interview, they persisted in college. Students developed cognitive and behavioral strategies to overcome and resist educational identities

developed in early educational institutions. These transformations are described in the next part of this finding. All 15 participants (100 percent) reported they developed a mindset of resistance and adopted behavioral strategies to promote success in the higher education environment.

## RESISTING EARLY EDUCATIONAL IDENTITIES: MINDSETS AND BEHAVIORAL STRATEGIES

First generation, adult college students made a decision to attend college despite a history of troubling experiences within educational institutions and the resulting educational identities. To make this type of decision, all participants reported they were able to overcome the fear and anxiety about attending college by applying a mindset of resistance. In particular, participants discussed the mindset they needed to overcome fear and insecurity related to previous experiences and identities. Interestingly, cognitive resistance is described in two distinct ways, which were nearly evenly split between participants. Half (8 of 15; 53 percent) of the participants described their mindset in terms of "just try," while the other half (7 of 15; 47 percent) of the participants described their mindset in terms of "nothing will stop me." The following examples from student narratives demonstrated how students used one of these two mindsets to resist and overcome educational identities developed in early educational institutions.

### *"Just Try" Mindset*

"Just try" was a less forceful, but still effective mindset students adopted to resist previous educational messages and overcome current fears and anxieties. Employing a "just try" mindset allowed participants to overcome insecurities about their academic abilities and belongingness in the college environment. Combined with the reality of

employment instability, students convinced themselves they had nothing to lose by "trying" to attend college. Rachel explained this cognitive strategy well:

> I was nervous. I was very nervous. But I've always been like this. If I want to do something, I'll just try it and do it. I'm not going to lose anything. That's what my thought was. I'm just going to give it a shot and see how it goes. (Rachel–Hispanic female, age 36)

In the same way, Diane stated that she finally decided to try taking a college course, despite her fears. Her previous educational experiences led her to describe her educational identity as "outcast." Understanding her fear of fitting in at college, she strategically decided to attend classes for the first time during the summer session, because she believed the campus would have fewer young students attending during this time.

> I just finally . . . I'm going try it. That's why I started in the summer, because there wasn't so many kids. . . . And I seen it wasn't that hard. It was a lot of work and everything, but they didn't single you out. (Diane–Native American female, age 48)

Diane decided to "just try," and by doing so, she experienced success that allows her to continue attending during the fall semester, when more students were on campus. Allowing themselves to "just try" and then consequentially experiencing success was a common strategy students used to overcome doubts about their abilities. Anna discussed the "mindset" she needed to overcome insecurities she felt throughout the enrollment process.

> I guess it was just my mindset, I already had it there. I was like, oh well, start basic math, oh well, I've got to start somewhere, and even my husband and my best friend said, "That's your foot in the door; even though you're starting from the bottom, you're starting." I'm like, yeah, I'm quitting my job, so what else do I have to do but take basic math. So I just have to see the positive side of it, even though at first it was like, "Man, that looks really bad. What do these people . . . ?" I kept thinking these people that are enrolling me, they're probably like, "Man, this girl is just really dumb." But after I got over all of that, I was just like, screw

> it, I just have to do it. Whenever I got to basic math, I was surprised that whole class was full. (Anna–Hispanic female, age 30)

To her surprise, Anna learned that she was not the only student who struggled with math when she saw that the basic math class in which she was enrolled was full.

The above examples demonstrated how participants adopted a mindset that allowed them to "try" attending college in spite of beliefs that they might not be capable of succeeding. They needed a mindset that allowed them to overcome past disappointments, failures, and beliefs about their academic abilities. The mindset provided them with the resistance needed to enter into the college environment.

*"No One Will Stop Me" Mindset*

The other participants used even stronger language to discuss the mindset adopted to overcome previous experiences and beliefs about their abilities. The students framed their mindset as "no one will stop me." In many ways, the participants decided they would continue and persist in spite of any obstacles they might encounter along the way. The narratives of Eva and Robert provided examples of how students adopted a mindset of "no one will stop me" to resist external barriers and internal self-doubt. Eva described the determination she adopted in the face of "red tape" associated with the enrollment process.

> No, just my determination. Just because there's red tape, doesn't mean I'm going to stop. You just have to push through the red tape and keep going. Everywhere you go, you're going to have red tape that's going to try to block you. Everyday life: you have red tape. Enrolling in school: it's a life choice. And if you really want that life choice, you're going to proceed on through whatever red tape you have to. You'll do whatever tap dance you have to do to do it. And I did. I did a lot of running to make sure I got through that process. [Laughs] . . . It just keeps you going because you don't want to be defeated. So it keeps me going because I'm not going to let college defeat me. (Eva–Hispanic female, age 39)

Eva's early educational identity was described as doing just enough work to pass classes and graduate. During her college enrollment, she decided she was going to persist, no matter what obstacles came her way. She would not "let college defeat" her.

Similarly, Robert described how his mind was already made up that he was going to "do awesome" in college. After experiencing difficulty through high school, describing himself as the "class clown," and being fired from his job, he decided to adopt a mindset that his focus and determination meant he would succeed.

> My main thoughts while I was enrolling was, "I know I'm going to do awesome." It's going to blow my mind with some of this stuff that I'm going to accomplish here, because I know how focused my mind is. Once I focus on something, that's it, there's nothing that's going to deter me from that. Once I realized that I was in college and I had enrolled in college, I knew that I was going to do good. I already knew that. It was just a matter of, "Let me see it in writing or let me see something to show that I did this in college," because back then, you're young, you're not focused on what you want to do in life, and by me being 41 now, I know what I want to do now. I know exactly what I want to pursue, I know how to pursue it, and there's nothing that's going to stop me from getting that, nothing in life, regardless of how hard the journey may be, there's nothing that's going to stop me from getting this. And that's my mentality, that's just me. (Robert–African American male, age 41)

The first step in resisting educational identities participants formed during early educational experiences was to develop a mindset that allowed the participants to overcome the fear and anxiety that surrounded college enrollment and attendance. The mindset adopted by these first-generation, adult students fell under two different themes: "just try" and "nothing will stop me." The development of these mindsets was an important form of cognitive resistance necessary to develop new educational identities within the higher education institutions. In addition to adopting a mindset of resistance, students also used behavioral strategies aimed at promoting their success in the higher education environment. Like the mindset, students chose behaviors that helped them

resist educational identities developed in previous educational institutions. The behaviors also alleviated fears and anxieties related to college enrollment and attendance.

All the students interviewed discussed behavioral strategies they used to promote success in college. Often, students used more than one of these strategies. Like the mindset, the behavioral strategies were used to overcome educational identities formed in early educational institutions and were often oppositional to behaviors reported during early educational experiences. The most common behavioral strategies adopted tended to revolve around four common themes: focused preparation, oppositional study habits, oppositional classroom behaviors, and oppositional social behaviors.

*Focused Preparation Strategies*

A common theme of behavioral resistance revealed by the narratives was focused preparation. Focused preparation included activities such as preparing for college-level work prior to enrollment and preparing for specific coursework prior to the start of the semester. Students with both mindsets, "just try" and "nothing will stop me," used focused preparation as a strategy to help them overcome worries about their academic abilities. The narratives of Daniel and Sally provided the most striking examples of students applying the strategy of focused preparation.

Daniel described his educational identity in high school as lacking focus and being the "class clown." The mindset he adopted was in the category of "just try." He decided to enroll in college after suffering an injury that prevented him from continuing to work at his current occupation. To prepare for college enrollment, he went to a local bookstore to purchase 30-40 college textbooks in multiple disciplines. He spent three

weeks reading and "absorbing" the knowledge in the books to build a knowledge base he believed was necessary to be successful in college. Daniel explained:

> I went and bought probably 30 or 40 different textbooks, used textbooks from a local bookstore, (name of used book store), and I think I spent a grand total of like 30 bucks for all of these books, in multiple disciplines, but primarily dealing with the general requirements and some of the more particular requirements in the discipline I've chosen, which is management information systems. I spent about three weeks before actually enrolling absorbing those books, I literally mean absorbing. I basically opened them up, sunk my teeth into them, and sucked them dry of knowledge. But that's just me, that's the way I operate. I needed a background. Now here I am, and I think that helped me get ready for the endeavor I'd already chosen to do, and it didn't put any milestones in front of me, so here I am. (Daniel–white male, age 48)

Previous educational experiences did not prepare Daniel for college, so he took it upon himself to plan, read, and study prior to enrolling in college. Like Daniel, Sally discussed the preparations she made prior to entering the classroom. Sally struggled with an undiagnosed learning disability during her early educational experiences. She described herself as not caring about academics and just skimming by during high school. Sally adopted a mindset of "nothing will stop me." Focused planning for college was course-specific. She purchased the textbooks two weeks prior to class and read them before the course began. She explained the details of her strategy in the following narrative:

> I go through my syllabus, hold on, I get my books two weeks prior to class starting and I read them all from front to back. I then start going back through and writing down all the definitions for each chapter. I put chapter one definitions, chapter two, and I do that for a whole, entire book so that I'm ready when school starts. I leave gaps, because I get the biggest spiral you can get. That way I can take notes when the teacher is going over it. . . . I think my syllabus, read it quickly of course, and then anything that's extra credit and I can find without the teacher telling me, I go and have it done before the [deadline]. . . (Sally–white female, age 35)

This focused preparation and studying was part of an overall desire to not only pass college courses, but to excel to a level of academic perfection. Sally revealed her desire to attain perfection when describing her inquiry about a grade that seemed to be a lower "A" than she expected.

> When I finished his class, I had a 99. When I finished my business class, which is the second class after, I took them same day, right behind each other, and I had 104. So when we did my final project in business, semester is over and I want to know what I got on it, and she said very politely in an e-mail, she said, "[Sally], an A is an A no matter how many times you re-add it." I said, "I just want to know." She said, "104, can't get any higher than that, but minus a few students who got maybe a point or two higher than you." She said, "You did really well." I went, "Okay, thank you." (Sally–white female, age 35)

A grade of 104/100 meant Sally completed the course requirements at a high level of achievement and completed additional extra credit provided by the instructor. Sally was concerned that she did not receive a perfect grade with all points, required and extra, earned. Sally's teacher explained to her, "An A is an A," to reassure Sally that she measured up as a student. Additionally revealing were Sally's remarks about what motivated her to engage in focused preparation.

> It's not like I'm super-smart and I know all this. I really sit down and I spend the extra three to six hours a day doing books, reading, and going over homework and rechecking homework. Do you know, I had my speech done two weeks before it was time to give it, and I still went over and re-changed it four more times. That's just because that's the standards I've set myself up for. (Sally–white female, age 35)

Sally continues to describe herself as not "super-smart," in spite of the success she experienced in college. As a reaction to previous life experiences, high academic standards for themselves are common among adult, first-generation college students. Such standards are often the motivating force behind the adoption of behavioral strategies that are oppositional to educational identities formed during early educational

experiences. The following narrative from Cheryl provided a good example of how past experiences motivated students to set high academic expectations:

> I think that's more . . . I've been afraid my whole life. I actually got a PTSD diagnosis at one point, so all that stuff that happened then, I've been dragging it along with me. I'm so much healed from it now, but I am still afraid sometimes of not performing to that really high level. I've got a 4.0, but it's always in danger because . . . Even taking a look at what I took today, and I thought, where will it give somewhere here, something, I don't see how this is going to be humanly possible. So far, I have gotten it all done. My bar is set high. I don't know how to scale back in some way. I don't know how to give any less than what I do, but I also am looking at this and I'm saying, I don't see how that's possible. (Cheryl–white female, age 53)

Cheryl's words highlighted the fear of failure that accompanied adult students as they progressed through an academic program. Even while maintaining a 4.0, the highest possible grade point average, Cheryl was fearful that at some point she would not be able to maintain this level of perfection.

High academic expectations for college course work motivated many participants to adopt behaviors oppositional to the educational identities they developed during early educational experiences. Oppositional study habits, oppositional classroom behaviors, and oppositional social behaviors were all behavioral strategies students adopted to overcome anxiety about college attendance and achieve academic success.

*Oppositional Study Habit Strategies*

Mark, Robert, and Cassie described oppositional study habits they developed to help them become successful students. During high school, Mark described his educational identity as doing just enough academic work to pass classes. His study habits in college were oppositional to those from high school:

> A lot of times I come in earlier than my class, a couple hours sometimes, and I'll go to the LRC (library), and I recently bought myself a laptop, so I'm spending

> more time trying to figure it out and making a lot of headway. (Mark–bi-racial male, age 41)

Like Mark, Robert engaged in oppositional study habits during college.

> But a lot of times I've tried to get myself into the habit of, as soon as I come in from school, the TV doesn't go on, and it's starting to become a habit like that now. I will get my books and set all my books up when I have homework home, and I start it and just the whole thing. Everybody that I've known before I got into college, I stress to them, "Go to college, that's where it's at. Can't nobody take that education away from you." (Robert–African American male, age 41)

Roberts described himself as "not a school type of person" during early educational experiences. He was often in trouble and had to finish his high school diploma at an alternative school. In college, he developed a mindset of "nothing will stop me" and stressed that he formed new study habits through his desire to complete his education. Unlike jobs, which as he learned could be lost, Robert believed education was something he would always have, once earned.

Cassie also described developing oppositional study habits that varied greatly from her early educational experiences. During her early educational experiences, Cassie was labeled as learning disabled and attended special education classes. She suffered bullying all through school and described herself as a loner. Cassie adopted a "just try" mindset and stated, "This is a new life and a new beginning," when explaining her enrollment in college. Here she discussed the oppositional study habits she used:

> Meeting friends, meeting people here has really taken my empty heart and filled it up with joy. I can feel it every day. I go home going, okay, I've got this left of homework to do, but I can accomplish this tonight and I can get it done by 10:00 tonight. When 10:00 rolls around and I'm hitting end, done. I've never done that in school. Never had to sit there and say, "Dang it, can't go anywhere until this is done." Boom, finished, and then I'm done by 10. Last night I got done by 9:30. (Cassie–white female, age 32)

There was excitement in her voice as she described the differences between her early experiences and those in college.

*Oppositional Classroom Behavior Strategies*

Similar to oppositional study habits, students also adopted oppositional classroom behaviors to resist fears about college attendance stemming from early educational experiences. Most of the students described relationships with teachers during high school as non-existent or neglecting. Conversely, in college, students engaged teachers in oppositional classroom behaviors. The narratives of Sally and Kimberly demonstrated the engagement of teachers in the college classroom as oppositional classroom behavior. During her early educational experience, Sally said she had no relationship with any of her teachers. She eventually dropped out of high school and married by the age of 15. When asked how her early educational experiences affected her behavior in college, she replied with the following narrative that demonstrated the link between adopting a mindset of "nothing will stop me" and using oppositional classroom behaviors.

> Oh, absolutely. I did so badly, I'm not going to fail. Being out on my own from 20+ years, raising kids, seeing them struggle: failure is not an option to me. I refuse to fail and I refuse to let anyone get in my way to fail. It's not going to happen and there's no such thing as a bad teacher; there is, but there's not. I believe if you can't understand the teacher, a closed mouth never gets fed. Speak up and tell them. "I don't understand what you're saying, you're going way too fast, and it's not making no sense, and your job is to teach me. I'm paying you to teach me, please teach me." (Sally–white female, age 35)

Rather than focus on the teacher's behavior or ability, Sally decided that she must engage in behaviors to compel the teacher to explain a concept until Sally was able to understand it. Likewise, Kimberly described low interaction between teachers and students during high school, with the exception of favored students. In college, she

adopted oppositional classroom behavior by talking to her math teacher about her anxiety, which helped her overcome obstacles related to math anxiety.

> I'd say probably the major step to get past it was actually saying out loud to my teacher, "I'm scared to death. I haven't done this for 30-some years," and algebra was icks-nay [nix] to me in high school and it was like, so hard for me, I thought. Turns out it really wasn't that hard; I just didn't concentrate. In high school you had your mind focused somewhere else. But yeah, just to come out and tell her that I was back in school after 30 years and hadn't been there and was scared to death and she said, "here's my number, here's my e-mail, anything you need any time, just call me." She was very supportive. (Kimberly–white female, age 51)

Kimberly learned that she could overcome her math anxiety by engaging in discussion with her instructor. In this way, she resisted past failures in math and eventually learned that the subject was not as difficult as she had previously believed.

*Oppositional Social Behavior Strategies*

Another behavioral strategy used by students to help them succeed in college was oppositional social behaviors. A good example of this was from Anna, who described the dominance of social groups over academics during her high school experience. Anna adopted a "nothing will stop me" mindset. When she encountered friends who tried to create obstacles to her success in college, she used oppositional social behaviors. Rather than allow the obstacle to affect her, Anna described how she no longer associates with friends who are not supportive of her decision to enroll in college.

> Before, I would say some of my friends, who I thought were my friends, once I started college, it was like, it was almost like, "I can't be in college, so why are you in college?" It's almost like a jealousy thing. So I don't hear too much from them, or I'll try to get a hold of them, "Oh, I'm just busy," and stuff like that. You know what, I'm doing something good for myself, and if you're not happy for me, I don't need it. So that would probably be on the friend issue. (Anna–Hispanic female, age 30)

Adult, first-generation college students engaged in several oppositional behaviors aimed at resisting fears and anxieties developed from past educational and life

experiences. Common behavioral strategies included focused preparation, oppositional study habits, oppositional classroom behaviors, and oppositional social behaviors. After adopting a mindset of "just try" or "nothing will stop me," students saw that they had to use behaviors that strongly contrasted with those they developed in early educational experiences. The change in disposition and behavior was the first step in developing new educational identities within the higher education institution.

As discussed in the literature review, some researchers focused on how early educational experiences influenced educational identities (Birch 2013; Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000; Luttrell 1996, 1997; Moore 2006). The process used to overcome previous educational identities when entering the college environment received little empirical attention, especially from the perspective of students. In one exception to the norm, Kasworm (2010) investigated student identities in adult students at a research university and was specifically interested in exploring learning engagement in the classroom and perceptions of involvement in college. As discussed above, Kasworm (2010) identified student concerns about enrolling in college as an adult. She also discovered some of the strategies students reported to overcome challenges in the college environment. To overcome concerns about being successful in the academic environment, the students discussed engaging in goal-oriented behavior, purposeful learner behavior, and persistence.

The findings in Kasworm's (2010) research had some important similarities and differences to those found in the current research. Kasworm identified a mentality of persistence that adult students adopted to be successful in college. Persistence was described as a special determination mentality or a suggested belief system for the

success of adult students. The theme of persistence had some similarity to the theme of "no one will stop me" found in the narratives of the current study. Students with this mindset reported that they planned to persist in college, regardless of obstacles they faced. However, half of the participants in this study expressed a less forceful mindset of "just try," which allowed them to overcome their fears and anxieties about enrolling in college. These students decided that their life situation was such that there was nothing to lose by enrolling and "trying."

Another similarity found in Kasworm's (2010) study was the use of the behavioral strategy of goal-oriented, purposeful learner behaviors. This theme was similar to the behavioral strategy of "focused preparation" discussed by participants in the present study. Goal-oriented, purposeful learner behaviors included activities such as taking remedial courses at a local community college, repeating coursework, and using high school textbooks to relearn basic academic concepts.

The narratives described above included instances of goal-oriented, purposeful behavior by reading old college textbooks, organizing course readings, and completing assignments prior to their due dates. The difference was that the behaviors were discussed in a way that illustrated the link between educational identities and behaviors. When Sally discussed her process of preparing for class and completing assignments prior to the due date, she linked the behavior to her belief that she was not "super smart" so she had to plan to reach her goals. By focusing on educational identities over the lifespan, the links between early educational experiences, educational identities, and behavioral strategies were illuminated.

A number of possible reasons might account for the differences between Kasworm's research and my own. The adult students interviewed in Kasworm's sample were not identified as first-time students, first-generation students, or low-income students. While some might have fit into these parameters, such demographics were not part of the interest for the study. Instead, Kasworm (2010) was interested in exploring how adult students enrolled at a research university judged themselves as students. A research university was used in the study because the college environment was considered youth-oriented and offered fewer resources for adult students than other types of colleges. The difference between the research populations, the college settings, and research focus made a full comparison difficult. However, the similarities pointed to the need to include how experience, setting, and social identities influenced the cognitive and behavioral processes of adult college students.

The above narratives highlighted the mindset of determination students feel at the onset of their college career and the ways in which students modify their own behavior to overcome feelings developed out of previous educational and life experiences. However, another important factor in supporting adult, first-generation college students was the social environment of the college itself. Students who entered the social field of higher education had the potential to find a supportive or hostile environment, one that either supported or discouraged their goals. The narratives of the participants revealed that the culture of the community college provided a social environment that encouraged students to develop positive educational identities.

## COLLEGE CULTURE AND EDUCATIONAL IDENTITY TRANSFORMATIONS

All 15 participants (100 percent) reported college as a positive environment that helped them change their perspectives of themselves and of education. All 15 participants (100 percent) also reported that enrollment in college led to a positive educational identity. A positive educational identity included improved self-concept (15 of 15; 100 percent), renewed joy of learning (14 of 15; 93 percent), and new experiences and knowledge (11 of 15; 73 percent).

Upon entering the college environment, students had to navigate previous experiences and educational identities with the need and desire to begin a college degree program. As described earlier, they adopted a mindset as a method of cognitive resistance and behavioral strategies as methods of behavioral resistance. The new behaviors were oppositional to educational identities developed in early educational environments.

### *Facilitating Positive Educational Identities*

The college environment can act as a facilitator to developing new and positive educational identities, or it can hinder such development. According to Mbilinyi (2006), the top two educational benefits listed by adults surveyed were gaining a personal sense of accomplishment (81 percent) and learning about things that interested them (78 percent). These top two benefits demonstrated personal motivations in attaining education as adults. The more pragmatic benefit of earning a higher income was the third highest benefit (71 percent) listed by the sample of adults.

While students in the present study were motivated by job-related reasons to enroll in college, the positive changes to their sense of self were articulated within the first year of attending college. In this study, all participants reported that the college

environment acted as a facilitator to changing their educational identities in positive ways. The positive experiences included learning experiences relevant to their lives, the ability to think in new ways, and caring instructors. A majority (13 of 15; 87 percent) of participants reported their best learning experiences in college were courses in which the learning was relevant to their lives.

*Learning is Relevant*

During high school educational experiences, students often described losing interest in academics because it was not meaningful to them, which left them feeling as though they did not belong in an educational environment. In contrast to these early educational experiences, the majority of participants reported that one of the most positive aspects of college coursework was that it was relevant or meaningful to their lives. Relevance might have been present because students had more life experiences to which they could relate information, but it was also because college curriculum stresses making learning experiences relevant to students' lives. Robert explained how the college learning environment differed from high school by allowing students more responsibility:

> In high school, they . . . you need to do this and you need to do this. After you do this, you need to . . . . Steps of what you need to do and holding your hand to make sure you're doing it, whereas college they don't do none of that. You do it on your own. If you don't, that's on you. So it wasn't a hard hurdle to jump for me, because I kind of had an idea about college. I didn't know exactly, but I had an idea you can't go in college like you are in high school, because it's a totally different atmosphere. You can eat in class. You can't do that in high school. I'm like, "Wow, you can eat in here!" [Laughter]. (Robert–African American male, age 41)

Unlike in high school, which was defined as prescribed and "hand-holding," Robert enjoyed that he was allowed to take responsibility for his own education in the college environment. Students relayed that the responsibility allowed them to choose

topics and paths they could relate to their lives and see links between their experiences and knowledge. Amy described how the ability to pick her topic allowed her to research and present on a topic that was meaningful in her life.

> . . . but if it's something that I know about or something simple like that, like we have our next essay, we get to pick our topic. I picked diabetes because my dad had it before he died and my sister has type two, so I'm not going to have any trouble coming up with four pages or six to ten minute presentation. She's like, I don't want it read to me off the paper, I want it presented to me. So I was like, I shouldn't have any problem, because I already know most of the stuff about it. (Amy–white female, age 33)

Similarly, Joseph explained how his speech instructor allowed students to choose the topics to research and present:

> My speech professor said, "I don't care what you give a speech on as long as it goes into this and fits this." He gave me choice. My history teacher, he did history, not just certain subjects. This is what we're going to try and go over. Let's go. . . . Yeah, it linked. It flowed really good. It wasn't just boring. This led to this and this led to this. (Joseph–white male, age 38)

Additionally, Joseph's history instructor did not focus on memorization of people and dates, but instead "did history" in a way that showed how historical events were linked together. Kimberly described how she enjoyed her government class because the teacher emphasized the humanity of governmental leaders by sharing their background stories, positive and negative. By learning about the social context of the leaders' lives, she became more interested in the subject.

> Learning things about the government that I didn't realize was really going on, different things about presidents, that I wasn't aware of their backgrounds and things like that. The teacher has been exceptional. He loves his job. He's been really good at what he does. . . . I just never really had an interest in world events, and I guess until it really starts sinking in at an older age, that this affects how your life turns out, essentially. (Kimberly–white female, age 51)

Age and experience helped Kimberly see the relevance of world events in her life. Sally also attributed the relevance of learning to her age and experience. Course work in

business and social sciences were easily applied to what she had learned through working.

> They're just interesting. Because I'm older and I can actually see how it plays into the scheme of everything, because I've already had a hundred crappy jobs. You start working naïve, but as you get older, you start figuring out things like, oh, you know, they explained that to me, now it makes sense. It just all seems to fit in. (Sally–white female, age 35)

Even in courses not directly related to a student's work or family life, such as art, become meaningful to students when they are allowed to actively participate. Anna explained:

> The instructors, first of all, just how they present their whole information, very well, knowledge obviously, but just even the art of it. I didn't think that the art would actually come out in me because I'm not artistic, but just how they teach you to look at art in a different way makes it more interesting, and then actually writing out the papers and knowing who the people were that were doing all the art and stuff, it was just real interesting to me. . . . So I just like how they do the video clips, the PowerPoints and the actual . . . like how students, how they actually, like, have you participate, get involved. So you have to learn it at some point, because everyone is so involved in it. That makes it a lot more interesting. (Anna–Hispanic female, age 30)

*Thinking in New Ways*

In addition to showing the relevance of learning to students' lives, the college environment promoted new ways of thinking about the subjects. Two-thirds (10 of 15; 67 percent) of the participants described positive learning experiences as the courses that helped them think in new ways. Students particularly enjoyed courses that were challenging and helped them make connections between subjects. Daniel explained he was surprised to find that he enjoyed subjects he previously thought of as "stupid" or uninteresting.

> I like gaining knowledge, no matter what it is, even in stupid fields, like what I thought poly-sci would be, or like I thought macroeconomics would be, or economics, period. I enjoy being surprised. Being surprised about both of those subjects was invigorating and it has opened concepts, viewpoints, within my mind's eye that I didn't realize I had, and it makes, like, more fun, more

> interesting and I equate interesting with fun. If it's not interesting, it's not worth my time. [Chuckle] If I find a way or the subject itself finds a way to make it interesting to me, it suddenly becomes fun. (Daniel–white male, age 48)

Instead of finding a required general education course uninteresting, Daniel learned that many different subjects were interesting, and therefore "fun." Joseph was surprised to find that history was one of his favorite courses because the instructor presented both positive and negative aspects of historical figures. Thinking about the faults as well as the successes of historical figures was a new experience for Joseph, and increased his interest in college-level learning.

> Well, I really liked my history class a lot. It was a challenge because he was a very difficult professor. His tests were ridiculous. But on the same time, it also showed me that the professors look for more than what your grades are. It's how you participate. How you involve yourself in the class. And it changed my stereotype of the professors as a whole because I expected . . . . "This is your grade. This is what you get." That's the first time I've ever been in an experience where someone is like, "Well, you did all this other stuff. And I'm the professor, so I can add it in however I want." . . . I liked the fact that somebody was teaching history outside of what everyone already knows. Like, everyone thinks all these historical people were just these amazing people. And then you find out a lot of them were just dirt bags who were in the right place at the right time, which makes it more interesting because it provides more humanization of the people. It makes them seem more human instead of just these awesome, mythical figures. I forgot; George Washington was a man. He wasn't like the messiah. He was a man. He had flaws. He had issues. You need to put those in perspective. (Joseph–white male, age 38)

Through this classroom experience, Joseph thought about history in new ways. Robert also described a course in which he began to think in new ways. When asked to discuss a positive learning experience in college, Robert described his experience in art class.

> The art class: I really like the art class because it gives me more insight on looking at different paintings and different sculptures, whereas before I took this art class, it was really obsolete. I'd just look, oh, okay. By me taking art, I understand now the color contrasts, the values of different colors together, and shapes, how different painters paint and what they are thinking, what their process

> is while they're painting. And it's really mind-blowing to see how they paint and the things, that I'm like, wow, that's . . . How do you even conjure up something like that and then paint it? So it's really a mind-blowing experience. And I've liked art ever since I was in school. I never really pursued it, but I loved to draw when I was younger and I loved to color. I loved to color. (Robert–African American male, age 41)

Robert discussed how the college art class contrasted with previous experiences. He described an early interest in art, but reported learning about art during early educational experiences as "obsolete." Once in college, he discovered new ("mind-blowing") ways of thinking about art, and therefore a new enjoyment of the subject. Like the other participants, Cheryl described her most enjoyable courses as those that raised the "level" of learning.

> Certainly, the interaction between the teacher and myself, and definitely, the level of what I'm learning makes it positive. It's challenging, but it's doable. So the level of what I'm learning, which makes me question what's going to happen at the next level, I'm assuming this is a base for the next level, but I definitely say hmmm, can I do that, can I go there? [Chuckle] I think probably the college experience for me mostly is about the learning; that's it. (Cheryl–white female, age 53)

Cheryl began thinking about subjects in new ways and anticipated the next "level" of learning that would present more new ways of thinking about subjects.

Students described the positive aspects of the college environment as including self-directed and meaningful learning and as promoting new ways of thinking. Teachers in college courses played a key role in developing and maintaining positive environments in the classroom. Several participants specifically described the importance of teachers in influencing positive learning environments.

*Caring and Understanding Teachers*

Instructors played a key role in creating a positive academic environment for first-generation adult college students. Nearly half (7 of 15; 47 percent) of the participants

reported that one of the aspects of the college environment that made it a positive experience included the caring and understanding teachers. Such reports varied significantly from the descriptions students gave of early experiences with teachers, especially in high school. When asked to describe the college environment, Cassie compared how teachers in college varied from those in high school:

> The teacher here, comparing the teachers over there [high school], these teachers listen, some of these teachers listen. The teachers at my school never listened. They will help you if you ask for it. The other teachers won't. They're more friendlier here than there. (Cassie–white female, age 32)

Cassie further explained how her college teachers encouraged her. When she was struggling in her math course, the instructor made her feel better and was patient with her:

> He said, "It will come to you, just take your time," and that's teaching, to me. That understands exactly what your difficulties are and that will help you comprehend and progress in each step of the way. That's what a teacher needs to be like. I feel so good going to [the instructor]. I went in there feeling like I was going to have a major panic attack, and he made me feel relaxed. He noticed I was struggling. So after showing him and saying, "I can't do that," it made me feel, like, "This teacher understands completely," and I feel great, and he said, "I'll see you Thursday." I'm just like, I didn't have to stay after class. I felt great. I walked out there going, "No tears today. Good job, [Cassie]." He's great. I wish all the teachers were like that. (Cassie–white female, age 32)

Likewise, Amy explained that college was a positive experience for her, because unlike high school, the instructors wanted you to learn and care about students:

> From what I've experienced so far, the teachers are more genuine and do want you to learn more. I think it will be a good experience. . . . So far, it's been really good. I did have a couple of setbacks since I started college. My dog, of course. She's 15, went to the ER with seizures, and I've been having to deal with her. So my teacher . . . My husband was in the ER once, but talking to the teacher and letting her know about that in my reading class. She was like, "That's no problem, just bring in your homework." Actually, she let me go home and I just e-mailed it: did the homework, e-mailed, and sent it to her. So the teachers are more understanding, and even though they want you to do your homework when it's due, they understand things come up. There's more—I can tell—with the teachers

> in college, there's more sincerity and there's more . . . like my husband had told me, they want you to succeed, and I can tell that in the teachers here . . . I think I'm going to do a lot better in college than in high school, just because the fact that the teachers actually want to help. (Amy–white female, age 33)

Both Cassie and Amy attributed the positive college environment to caring teachers. Teachers were also a key influence in setting the tone of the classroom environment. Joseph explained that he enjoyed professors who were passionate about what they taught:

> I just enjoyed the professor. He really was a very. . . He was passionate about what he was teaching and I enjoy that. I enjoy someone who is well educated in their subject but also passionate about it. It makes me be more interested. It makes me want to work harder in the class. Because if someone doesn't care about their class, then it shows, and it rubs off on everybody else, and they don't care either. So the fact that he was well informed and passionate and was willing to not sugarcoat history made it very interesting. (Joseph–white male, age 38)

Joseph recognized that the teachers influenced the classroom environment, and those who were passionate and excited about what they taught created a learning environment that reflected that passion. Cheryl recognized that the college environment itself included "respect" for students, which was demonstrated through the actions and attitudes of college teachers.

> I see a lot of respect for the students. I don't know if that's because that's the atmosphere that's cultivated here, I don't know if that's because this is that school, I don't know if I just keep lucking into the really great teachers. I don't know, but I see such respect for differences, cultural differences, even intellectual differences. I see a great deal of respect for that. There's such a willingness to help students. (Cheryl–white female, age 53)

In contrast to the learning environment described during early educational experiences, all 15 participants in this study described college as providing a positive environment that helped them change their perspectives of themselves and of education. The aspects of the college environment that created positive learning experiences

included courses in which learning was self-directed and relevant to their lives, encouraged new ways of thinking, and included caring and respectful teachers. The social field of higher education influenced the educational identity of students. In this study, students reported the college environment and experience resulted in positive changes.

## EDUCATIONAL IDENTITY TRANSFORMATIONS

All 15 participants (100 percent) reported that enrollment in college had resulted in changes that led to positive educational identities, including improved self-concept for all 15 participants (100 percent). A majority (14 of 15; 93 percent) of participants specifically discussed how college learning had given them a renewed joy of learning, and 11 of 15 (73 percent) participants reported that college enrollment had led to new experiences and new knowledge.

### *Increased Confidence*

After enrolling in college, the college environment acted as a mechanism for creating positive educational identities for first-generation adult college students. All participants reported the enrollment and attendance in college resulted in changes that led to positive educational identities. All participants (100 percent) reported that enrollment and participation in college had improved their self-concept by increasing confidence, self-esteem, pride, and overall happiness. Kimberly, Cassie, and Robert described how college led to positive educational identities through increased confidence:

> It's given me more self-confidence, because I've . . . might be a little more outspoken than I used to be. I've always been rather independent, probably just from being the only girl in the family as a child, from going to a marriage that didn't work and raising a daughter by myself for a couple years, and then remarrying and finding out that one wasn't going to work either. So I pretty much have stayed independent through all these years, but it's given me a boost of self-confidence to know that I'm not a wimp, I can handle it. . . . I just think it's been

> fantastic. I love the people; the teachers have been great. The overall, the whole overall experience has just been enlightening. It's been a ego boost, if nothing else. (Kimberly–white female, age 51)

> I never, ever had confidence in myself to read out loud. Now I have confidence in myself. (Cassie–white female, age 32)

> It gives me a sense of a lot of confidence, so much as being the first member of my family, of my immediate family to be in college. So it really gives me a great feeling of confidence. (Robert–African American male, age 41)

In addition to describing increased confidence, other students described increased self-esteem as part of the positive educational identities they developed. Eva explained that being a college student boosted her self-esteem by making her feel important:

> It's an ego booster for me. . . . It's gotten my self-esteem up a lot. . . . Myself, I just feel important. It makes me feel important to be a student. . . . I was just another person in society. Being a student, I feel like I'm here to make a difference, to make a purpose for other people. And before, I wasn't, not important, but it seems like you shine more as a student to other people. You can influence people more when they say, "She's a student. If she can do it, I can do it." I guess it's the influence that makes you feel so important with other people. But being a student, it just adds that extra esteem boost to that, ego boost to that. But it makes you shine among people. They think you're making a difference. (Eva–Hispanic female, age 39)

Attending college built self-esteem for Diane because she could complete tasks that she did not realize she was capable of completing:

> I think it's building my self-esteem back up . . . because I'm doing things that I didn't think that I was capable of doing. (Diane–Native American female, age 48)

Amy found that attending college made her feel better about herself, increasing her self-esteem:

> I don't think I'm better than anybody else, but you know you've got that . . . I'm trying to make myself better. I'm trying to do this. So it kind of makes your self-esteem or the way you carry yourself, it's like I'm trying to get there. At least I'm trying to do this. Yeah, it makes me feel better about myself that I'm actually trying to do it. (Amy–white female, age 33)

Positive educational identities were also described as the sense of pride students felt at their accomplishment. Anna provided a good example of this sense of pride: "I'm proud of myself. Half the time, I can't believe half the stuff that I'm learning and that I actually learned it. It's very interesting" (Anna–Hispanic female, age 30). In his narrative, Joseph discussed his surprise ("holy crap") at achieving a 4.0 grade average. He was so proud of his achievement that he sent copies of his college transcripts back to some of his high school teachers to make a point to them that he was capable of learning, in spite of the negative beliefs developed during high school.

> I mean, holy crap, I'm more than capable of doing this! I'm a 4.0 student! So that was a motivating experience right there. . . . It's the most surreal thing I've ever been involved with. . . . I never was on the honor roll in high school and I'm a 4.0 student. That's surreal. I even sent some of that to my high school teachers, just to spite them. I did. They were like, "How did that happen?" Not because of you. (Joseph–white male, age 38)

Other students discussed how attending college led to an overall feeling of happiness in their lives. Amy and Sally offered good examples of positive educational identities demonstrated through happiness and hopefulness.

> Happier about coming to school. It's a lot easier to get up and actually come to school because you know you're learning something that you're going to eventually . . . For me, it might be selfish, but I like working with children—that's why I picked the RN and pediatrics—but the money, too, being financially stable. So coming to school every day, knowing that one day I'm going to be there and I'm not going to have to worry about the money situation. I'm not going to have to worry about paycheck-to-paycheck and then I'll be able to hold the fort down when my husband goes, and then we'll be good. (Amy–white female, age 33)

> It's made me a happier person, a lot happier. I don't feel hopeless. I don't feel like, another day. When I wake up, I used to cry before I went to work, just because I knew what was going to entail being there. I loved my customers, could not stand the lady I worked for, the new one. But here, even not feeling well, I was up and ready to leave the house at 7:30. It's college. I love every bit of it. . . . Yeah, it's like its own little community and I don't have to leave. You can't make me. (Sally–white female, age 35)

Students described the many ways participating in higher education changed their perception of themselves. Unlike previous experiences in educational institutions, the social environment of higher education led to positive changes in the way students viewed themselves as students. Increased confidence, self-esteem, pride, and overall happiness were aspects of positive educational identities apparent within the first year of entering the college environment.

*Enjoyment of Learning*

Another aspect of positive educational identities for first-generation adult students was a renewed joy of learning. A majority (14 of 15; 93 percent) of participants specifically discussed how college learning had given them a renewed joy of learning. Several (9 of 14; 64 percent) of the participants specifically explained how the renewed joy of learning was different, or in opposition to, high school learning. A good example of this phenomenon was discussed by Joseph.

> I'm a completely different animal. That's a good way to describe it. I'm an adult now. I look back and say, "Wow, if only I had done this earlier in high school." But that was a part of my life that I have to let go and not go back and look at. If I do that, I'll get those doubts in my head. I'm looking at it like, "I'm a freshman." It's like high school on steroids, minus the stupid stuff. I have more control over my experience. That's the difference. That's the biggest difference. I have more control over my experience in college than I ever did in high school. That's why it's more enjoyable. (Joseph–white male, age 38)

Joseph explained that the social environment of college allow greater control over his experience. Because of this control, he found learning more enjoyable than when he attended high school. Eva discussed a similar reason for her enjoyment of college:

> Now, before, that was one of my cons that kept me from coming. Just that fear of, "I'm going to be walking back into high school again with all the drama." It's not there. You don't get into the little cliques or anything like that. It's an individual thing. So I really enjoy being in college. And plus, the social interaction with different age groups has helped. You learn more how to deal with these younger

> people as they're coming up. You can teach them as well as they can teach you. They may have the book smarts; you have the common sense. So it's nice to be able to interact with them on an educational level that we both understand. I've enjoyed it quite a bit. (Eva–Hispanic female, age 39)

Initially, Eva was worried that the college environment would be similar to high school. After she learned that the college environment recognized "individual" attributes, she found the environment enjoyable.

Alex lost interest in learning while in high school, but discussed his elementary school learning experiences as "fun." Alex expressed his new joy of learning as similar to what he felt as a child.

> Maybe the kid-like attitude I had, back when I cared a little bit about school and where it was fun and I could learn; it opened up your mind. It was made for molding at that time, as a kid, is maybe the way I want it to be again because it was fun back then. It was fun because you didn't have a care in the world, and now at the time when I do have cares in the world, but you still want to put yourself in that kind of frame of mind of, "I'm ready to learn, I'm ready to learn whatever you're out there telling me to do. Whatever you're teaching me, I'm ready to learn it." (Alex–white male, age 37)

Alex felt like his mind was open and ready to learn, similar to how a child's mind is open to learning. He remembered learning as fun when he was a child, and he felt the same way about college learning.

Often students expressed surprise about how much they were enjoying learning in college. Anna's words demonstrated her delight when she realized that she "actually" enjoyed learning:

> My experience has been good because I'm excited about it. Just knowing that I'm coming and I'm learning and actually enjoying what I'm learning, because you're at that point where you're sitting there and you're like, "I'm not sitting here to waste my money, I'm not sitting here to just pass my time." You're in there, and when you actually have that mindset, you're learning, and you're liking what you're learning. You walk out of class and you're like, "Oh my gosh, guess what I just learned today." (Anna–Hispanic female, age 30)

Anna showed excitement in her words when she said, “Oh my gosh, guess what I just learned today.” Rachel expressed similar joy at learning concepts that surprised her:

> I like it. I like learning. I like what I’m experiencing. Some things, you hear and you weren’t expecting to learn. I like that I’m being taught all these things . . . that I wasn’t aware of or I didn’t even imagine. I love it. (Rachel–Hispanic female, age 36)

Cassie expressed similar excitement when she described how she felt after answering a question correctly in class:

> It did, it finally clicked, and I’m just like, “Was that my brain working?” I felt like, “That’s not me. That’s not me.” I went home and told my mom and dad about it and they’re just like, “You didn’t,” and I go, “I did.” She’s like, yeah. That’s how I felt. I’m much happier where I’m at: much, much, much happier. (Cassie–white female, age 32)

Cassie’s joy of learning was expressed as happiness when she felt her “brain working.” Happiness at learning and attending college was a common theme among these first-generation, adult students. Sally summed up the feelings well:

> Oh, I love it. Love it. It’s the best place on earth. If I could make a living out of this, I would never go back to work. . . . I love it here. I’m actually very sad that I only have one more year here. I know everybody else is like, one more year, and I’m just like, it’s only one more year. Then I’m all grown up. (Sally–white female, age 35)

A renewed joy of learning was an important aspect of developing positive educational identities. Rather than viewing learning as, “I have to,” as many did during high school, these students now saw learning as, “I get to.” Students often expressed surprise at how much they enjoyed learning in the college environment.

*New Experiences and Knowledge*

Students were also surprised and excited to find that the college environment led them to new experiences and knowledge. A majority (11 of 15; 73 percent) of the participants reported the college enrollment led them to new experiences and new

knowledge. Students experienced changes in the way they viewed themselves as a result of engaging in new activities and gaining new knowledge. The following narratives from Anna and Marcy demonstrated how gaining new experience and knowledge changed their perception of themselves in positive ways.

> I started writing these papers, and after that, every single paper from there that I've done for Humanities, for writing classes, for history, I look at my papers and I can't believe I did that. I've gotten so much good feedback: "You're a great writer." I'm surprised. I look back at my papers and I'm like, "I said that." It's fulfilling. It makes everything worth it because the things that you thought were not in you come out when you're doing it. It could be effortlessly, but it's coming out because you're willing, you're interested. I'm very proud of my papers. . . . I look at all my papers, because I still have all my papers, and I look over them and I'm like, "I've written this many papers since I've been in college. Oh my gosh!" It's good. It's a good accomplishment to look back on when I was like, "Oh I'm stupid," and then you look at my papers and I'm like, "No I'm not." (Anna–Hispanic female, age 30)

> I think it's bettered me. I feel the . . . Especially my friend, who's a doctor, when I talk to her, I feel like we're on the same level, versus her being a superior to me. I can hold a conversation with her and understand what she's saying, versus being like that 12-year-old child that's talking to her. (Marcy–white female, age 33)

Before experiencing learning in a college environment, Anna described herself as "stupid" and Marcy believed she held conversations like a "12-year-old." After experiencing feedback from her college essays, Anna was surprised to learn that she was a "great writer." The new definition of herself replaced her previous belief that she was "stupid." Likewise, Marcy used the new knowledge gained in college to engage in conversations with those she previously believed were "superior" to her. She now believed she was "on the same level" as friends with more education.

Amy explained that the coursework in her reading class changed the way she thought of herself. Previously, she said she was "not a reader," but after her class, she

changed the way she thought about reading and ended up buying several books at a local Goodwill store.

> The reading class, because some of the material that she's picked out, like the book she had us read, which I was just telling her the story, it's called *Tell No One*, and the author just slipped my mind. But we had so much time to read it, but I got to read it the first day and read it in three nights, which I'm not a reader. My husband will tell you, "I haven't seen her read a book through." . . . I've read one book throughout my whole life. I just couldn't put it down. I was like reading, reading, reading. So we were at the Goodwill the other day and we walked by and I was like, "That's the author. I got to get all these books." So I ended up getting like seven of his books, all that they had on the shelf. (Amy–white female, age 33)

Amy gained new knowledge and a new perspective of herself. She is now "a reader."

Other research explored educational identity transformations in the college context (Kasworm 2010; Kaufmen and Feldmen 2004; Moore 2006). Kaufman and Feldmen (2004) explored identity formation in college students using the sociological approach of symbolic interactionism. Prior to their research, much of the student services literature focused on emerging identities using psychological or developmental approaches. The Kaufmen and Feldmen research explored how students formed "felt identities" within the context of social interactions in the college environment.

Through the analysis of over 80 interviews with college seniors, Kaufmen and Feldmen (2004)explored whether the college environment held something distinctive that helped students develop a particular sense of self and examined how the structural location of college fostered the formation of new forms of felt identities. Felt identities were defined as *self-concept* and were differentiated from parts of identity that included presentation of self and attributes imposed by others. The demographics for the participants in the study did not include age information, but the students as primarily

traditional college age was implied through the description. The researchers acknowledged diversity in their sample in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, social class, and first-generation status.

Kaufman and Feldmen (2004) found that within the college context, students developed distinctive "felt identities" in three specific domains: intelligence and knowledgeability, occupational, and cosmopolitan. Rather than measure student "knowledge" attainment using standardized measures, Kaufman and Feldmen (2004) explored how students' identified themselves as knowledgeable and intelligent selves within the college experience. The occupational domain referred to identification with and aspiration to a particular professional job or career. The cosmopolitan domain referred to the extent to which students viewed their cultural interests becoming more sophisticated and cultured. The "intelligence and knowledgeability" domain was similar to the concept of educational identity used in the present study.

Kaufman and Feldmen (2004) identified several roles the college experience played in the (trans)formation of felt identities: interactions with others in the college environment, self-appraisals by the student, social comparisons with others, and emulation of role models. Conversely, the above narratives indicated the social environment within the classroom exerted the greatest influence on participants' self-perceptions. The first-generation, adult students expressed the relevance of learning, new ways of thinking, and interactions with faculty as the most important college contextual factors related to the (trans)formation of educational identities. The participants and social settings differed between Kaufman and Feldmen's study and this dissertation on several factors; however, the main point was consistent: identifying the college

environment as an important site where messages about the self were interpreted and given meaning.

Within the first year of college attendance, first-generation, adult college students discussed the changes in their educational identities. All of the participants discussed increased confidence as a result of college attendance. The social meaning attached to attending college, achieving good grades, and becoming a college graduate exerted influence on the identities of college students. In the same way, Kaufman and Feldmen (2004) found, "[J]ust being in college appears to bestow on some students a sense of being intelligent and knowledgeable. Attending . . . college is a symbolic marker that suggests both to oneself and to others that one has a certain degree of intellectual competence and knowledge" (p.470).

Kaufman and Feldmen (2004) stated, "Because college is invested with so much meaning in the larger society, to feel worthy of attending college is itself significant for how individuals identify themselves by these characteristics" (p.470). For first-generation, adult students, feeling "worthy" of attending college was a challenge they had overcome. Once they experienced success within the college environment, their confidence increased and educational identities began to transform.

Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) studied educational identities or learning careers of young adults in the United Kingdom and posited that educational identities must be understood within the social context of experiences. They preferred to describe the development of learning careers in terms of "transformations" rather than change. "Transformations in learning careers take many forms. They are not predetermined, although they are oriented by the habitus of the individual and by the material and

cultural contexts within which the habitus has developed and the person is located" (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000;591). Because educational identities are formed through interaction and interpretation of meaning, dispositions are continually reinterpreted and modified by social interactions over time.

Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) concluded that educational identity transformations occurred when students were exposed to diverse forms of social interaction, to new events, and to changing circumstances. They proposed that the finding had implications for studying adult students who returned to education after a long absence. They questioned whether adult students would also demonstrate transformations based on the exposure to new interactional opportunities. My research demonstrated that new interactional opportunities did, indeed, produce transformations in educational identities of adult students, as did new events and changing circumstances.

The idea that adults experienced transformations in their identities within the context of education was supported by other research. In life-history interviews with women who entered an adult literacy program, Luttrell (1997) found that the identities of adult women students were not static, but in flux. Luttrell suggested the act of returning to school as adults, in fact, might be an act of resistance to the educational identities formed in early schooling experiences. The students did not fully accept the myth of meritocracy, but rather returned to school to reclaim parts of themselves denied earlier. Luttrell explained, "Having been encouraged to stifle the development of some aspects of themselves for the sake of others, these women returned to school to regain the visibility, voices, and autonomy denied them" (p.117).

Moore (2006) focused analysis of life-history narratives on the process of becoming a university student and educational identity transformations within higher education institutions. Also similar to my findings, Moore (2006) found that students reported increased self-concept and more confidence as a result of attending college. Moore concluded that ideas related to individuals' educational identity formed in youth were not fixed and could be transformed through experiences later in life. Education experiences later in life transformed how students saw themselves, changed how they perceived others saw them, and altered their position in social space through upward mobility.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The social field of higher education, specifically the community college, provided the social context necessary for first-generation, adult students to revise their educational identities. Those who defined their educational abilities based on lackluster performance or disinterest during early educational experiences quickly found that higher education offered them the chance to redefine themselves. Upon entering the college environment, all participants described feelings of fear and anxiety based on previous educational experiences and beliefs about their educational abilities. The fear they felt upon entering the college environment was often accompanied by excitement, which allowed students to form mindsets to resist both internal and external obstacles such as self-doubt and red-tape. Participants actively sought to overcome fear and anxiety through specific behaviors aimed at increasing their likelihood of success in college.

Once involved in the college environment through classroom and campus attendance and participation, all the students found the social field conducive to

redefinition of themselves as learners. Caring and understanding instructors set the tone in the classroom, where students discovered that learning was relevant, contextual, self-directed, and meaningful. The college environment stood in stark contrast to descriptions of their high school learning environment, where students were overwhelmingly disinterested, neglected, and disenfranchised. The college environment was engaging and exciting. Students quickly found that the college environment provided a foundation for building positive educational identities. They described stories of increased confidence, pride, joy of learning, and accumulation of new knowledge. The experiences and changes cumulated into the formation of positive educational identities.

Educational institutions are sites where students learn who they are within the institution, including characteristics such as aptitudes and belongingness. The first finding uncovered the link between early educational experiences and educational identities. Early educational experiences were troubling and difficult for a majority of students, particularly during high school. The academic material was not meaningful, peer relationships dominated the school, and teachers seemed uncaring and neglectful. Within the educational institution, students learned messages about themselves, creating educational identities. They developed an understanding of who they were within the educational institution, including their aptitudes and belongingness. A majority of students described their educational identities as disengaged and poor students, as well as lacking a sense of belongingness in the academic environment. By the time others were preparing to attend college, these students were doing the bare minimum to pass classes, hoping they would never again have to experience anything like high school.

The second finding in this study demonstrated the way educational identities affected educational decisions. The negative experiences associated with high school, and the resulting educational identities, were factors in students' decisions not to attend college directly after high school. Students did not want to repeat the failures associated with high school, nor did they want to continue enduring the harmful social relationships. Students did not believe they belonged in the college environment, thinking it was a place for "smart people" or others not like themselves. However, later in life, the same students found themselves needing and wanting to enroll in and attend college.

The third and fourth findings uncovered the life experiences that led a first-generation, adult student to enroll in college later in life. Most students considered college enrollment for job-related reasons. Some lost jobs due to firing or downsizing, others experienced a disability, and some were generally dissatisfied with their jobs. They also were prompted to enroll in college because of an overall feeling of being tired of struggling financially. The decision to enroll in college was enhanced by students receiving emotional support from a significant person in their life.

The fifth finding highlighted how students negotiated educational identities formed during early educational experiences within the field of higher education. The educational identities formed during early educational experiences continued to influence students as they enter the college environment as adults. All the participants expressed fear and anxiety about attending college related to beliefs about their ability and belongingness. To overcome fear and anxiety, participants exercised cognitive and behavioral strategies of resistance. Students adopted a mindset of "just try" or "nothing

will stop me" to resist doubts caused by troublesome educational identities. Additionally, students incorporated oppositional behavioral strategies inside and outside the classroom.

The sixth finding revealed the ways in which the social field of higher education supported the development of positive educational identities. Students' educational identities were transformed (or transforming) within the first year of college attendance. All of the participants found parts of the college environment supportive of making positive changes to their perspectives of themselves and education. College coursework was meaningful and relevant to their lives. They began to think in new ways and found supportive and caring teachers. All of the participants had changed beliefs about their abilities and belongingness within the educational environment. They had increased confidence, discovered a renewed joy of learning, and gained new experiences and knowledge.

Chapters IV, V, and VI outlined the key findings and interpretations from the narratives of first-generation, adult students. In the next chapter, I discuss the conclusions and implications of the findings. I close with proposed policy recommendations and directions for future research.

# CHAPTER VII:

# CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research revealed how educational identities were formed and transformed within educational institutions over the lifespan, and described how the identities were related to decisions about education. Emphasizing the social construction of educational identities from the perspective of participants, this research included a life-history approach to explore the educational identities of first-generation, adult students enrolled in the first year of an associate degree program at an urban, multi-campus community college in the Midwest. The study findings provided a glimpse of how educational institutions (re)produced social class and how educational identities were shaped through social interaction within educational contexts. This research was guided by cultural (re)production theories. Next, I discuss the theoretical implications of the findings in this study, followed by recommendations based on the findings.

## THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Cultural (re)production theories provided the framework that guided this research and the findings provided some insight into the perspectives. Social and cultural (re)production theories provided a framework for analyzing the ways in which inequality was reproduced through social institutions, specifically educational institutions. Theories of cultural (re)production explain how schools can instill either a sense of knowledgeable self or a sense of failure in students (Levinson and Holland 1996). The approach was

particularly valuable to understanding the complex ways an "educated person" is produced through educational experiences.

The structure of educational institutions, while allowing individuals to make any number of choices, continues to produce individuals who behave in predictable ways. For example, even though college enrollment has increased significantly over the last 30 years, inequality continues to exist for low-income students and racial/ethnic minorities (Jones 2013). Cultural (re)production theories provided an approach for understanding the role of educational experiences in the educational identities of students and the contributions of such experiences to (re)producing the economic situation of their family of origin. Analyzing the influence of school context on students' sense of self as learners enables reframing the concept of student success and failure. A situated perspective of student outcomes considers the context in which learning takes place and is shaped (Rubin 2007).

This research lent support to the concept that schools are important cultural sites where people receive messages about who they are within schools and society and about their aptitudes within educational institutions. Individuals internalize these and meld them to become part of the person's educational identity. A majority of the participants reported early educational experiences that were difficult and troubling. The curriculum lacked meaning or connection to students' lives, peer relationships became more important than academics, and teachers seemed uncaring. Such experiences within educational institutions contributed to how students perceived themselves as learners: their educational identities. The negative experiences associated with elementary or high

school and the resulting educational identities were factors in the students' decisions not to attend college directly after high school.

The school acted as a site with the authority to define academic achievement, "success," and "failure." When Cassie (white female, age 32) was labeled with a learning disability in elementary school, she was transferred to a special education class. This intervention, and the stigma attached to the label, contributed to Cassie's experience of peer victimization in school. The school's lack of action to this abuse sent additional messages to Cassie that the school did not care about her and she was not important. By the time Cassie graduated from high school, she described herself as a "loner" and believed she was a poor student who did not "deserve" to graduate. The beliefs about her academic abilities led Cassie to discard any thoughts of attending college after high school graduation. "Graduating wasn't a good thing, because I never really got taught. Yeah, whippty doo, I got my diploma, but it doesn't prove that I actually deserved it" (Cassie–white female, age 32).

In addition to experiencing the violence of peer victimization and exclusion, Cassie experienced symbolic violence through messages received at school about her academic abilities and self-worth. Symbolic violence is the negative sense of self developed by those not in the elite class because of their inability to achieve the cultural capital to advance within the social context. In the social context of school, the label attached to Cassie's learning disability made her ability to gain the cultural capital needed to be considered a "good" student impossible.

The school is the primary context in which learner attributes are defined, categorized, and ranked. Cassie was categorized as "special education," ranking her low

in valued learner attributes, and she had no other way to define herself as a learner. Additionally, the lack of action on the part of teachers and administrators to stop the peer victimization she experienced provided the message to Cassie that she was not important, affecting her self-worth. By looking at the school achievement as situated within the social context of the school, we expand potential solutions to school disengagement or failure to include analysis of the environment in which student educational identities are formed and transformed (Rubin 2007).

Important cultural capital in the school context is not limited to test scores and letter grades. Family background characteristics based on income and wealth play a role in how students are defined, categorized, and ranked. When Diane (Native American female, age 48) discussed her early schooling experiences, she stated she made straight A's in course work. For many people, grades would represent a form of cultural capital in a school setting. However, for Diane, this was not the case. She did not possess the social attributes that were arguably just as important, or more important, to cultural capital within the school context.

Diane described herself as overweight and very low-income. She described severe peer victimization and lack of intervention by teachers and administrators. Even after discussing her high letter grades in school, she continued to describe herself as "not the smartest one." For Diane, academic achievement "didn't matter" to her educational identity because she was "the outcast, the picked-on one."

Within the social context of schools, teachers hold power, linked to authority, over students and are the primary school representatives for student interaction. The instances of teacher favoritism are important factors related to how students understand

their academic abilities and place in the school and society. Kimberly (white female, age 51) remembered teachers favoring the students whose parents had a good job and nice house. She recalled that teachers were more critical of the schoolwork she produced than of the work of the students the teachers favored. Kimberly became disengaged from academics during high school and stated that she did only what she needed to graduate. The life-history narratives of the first-generation, adult students illustrated how the field of elementary and high schools created learner dispositions depicting disengagement and motivation to avoid additional schooling after graduation.

Cultural (re)production theories begin with the analysis of the effects of school context in learners' understandings of themselves; however, students are not passive recipients of such messages. They interact with and interpret messages. One of the foundational works for this perspective is *Learning to Labor* by Paul Willis (1977). Willis investigated how working-class "lads" in the United Kingdom interacted with and interpreted messages about succeeding in school. He posed that because the young men knew their "place" in the labor force was working class, they resisted school culture and ideals, thereby (re)producing the economic situation of their family of origin.

Other researchers suggested that low-achieving students sttempted to maintain a positive self-image by seeking other means of gaining social status within schools (Kelly 2009). For example, students tracked as low-achieving by schools seek success through athletics or peer-group status, rejecting status based on academic success in the process. Kelly (2009) explained that in studies on student values and engagement, researchers found that poverty and low academic tracking were related to lower levels of engagement. The assumption was that low-achieving students had an incentive to become

disengaged to maintain a positive identity. They developed anti-school "oppositional" values that explained the lack of engagement.

Some participants in this study described choosing social relationships over academics, while others indicated that social groups were imposed on them, based on circumstances within the school. However, the narratives did not indicate that students were actively resisting school values or developing "anti-school" oppositional values. Narratives offered no indication that students sought peer relationships to increase their status. Instead, the students had already disengaged from academics, felt a lack of belonging in school, and gravitated to peers with similar economic and social circumstances. For example, Alex explained how he felt about learning in high school and then described his shift in focus toward social relationships with those who were similar to him.

> Loss of interest, would rather do other things; not necessarily bad things, just loss of interest due to, "I don't want to be here. I'd rather be doing other stuff." . . . So I was basically not there. I was there, but not there mentally. . . . It was boring. Social; I was there for social purposes. I wanted to hang with friends and do other stuff; that's all I cared about. So it was social time for me instead of work. (Alex–white male, age 37)

For Alex and other participants, academic disengagement took place before or simultaneously with shifting focus to peer relationships. Kelly (2009) pointed out we cannot rule out the school context and student perceptions of opportunity when explaining student engagement in school. Separating the low-engaging context (school and instruction) from student identities and peer relationships is difficult.

For example, students labeled as low-track are channeled into classrooms that tend to emphasize memorization, order, and rules, showing low levels of unity between lessons and students' lives. Disengagement may be less a response to peer group

membership and status maintenance than a response to disengaging instruction. Problems of engagement in elementary and high schools may be the result of stratified learning environments and instruction rather than of anti-school oppositional value systems based on student identity and peer relationship.

Even when students accept the logic of the school, they may still find themselves without the academic preparation to continue to college. In an observational study of the social context at a low-income, urban high school, Rubin (2007) found that students were sad about their disconnect from school. Students often discussed how they liked school in the past and "used to be smart" (Rubin 2007:243). Often students seemed to have a sense of hopelessness and disassociated themselves from school. Rubin concluded that very few individuals could persist in this world or gain the skills needed to move on to higher education.

> This was a "catch-22" for students in that both compliance and non-compliance with the demands of the setting would achieve the same result–a lack of preparedness for higher education due to emphasis on rote, low level skills and lack of access to adults who could guide them toward their goals. (Rubin 2007:244)

Students were not rejecting school values and therefore reproducing the economic realities of their parents. They wanted to do well in school. Both accepting and rejecting school values led students to the lack of academic preparation for college (Rubin 2007). The school context explained disengagement and lack of academic preparation more than did peer relationships or oppositional values.

None of the participants in this study attended college directly after high school. Based on their descriptions of learning experiences in elementary and high school, the learning environment did not lend itself to preparing them for additional education. When

first-generation, adult students reflected back on their schooling experiences, they remembered the school's failure to address learning disabilities and peer victimization, an emphasis on memorization, and lack of relevance to the students' lived experiences. They remembered teachers showing favoritism to students whose families had higher incomes or who excelled in a high profile sport. They remembered peer relationships through which they found either a sense of belonging, independent of school, or further ostracizing, finding neither solace nor belonging in peer groups. By the time they graduated or left high school, they were so disconnected from academics and the educational environment that few gave college enrollment any consideration.

Even though students' educational identities prevented them from enrolling in college directly after high school, the students eventually enrolled in college and were successfully progressing at the time of the interviews. Their narratives highlighted that experience in other social contexts such as employment and circumstances could lead people to re-evaluate educational identities later in life. As a result of many years of financial struggle, job dissatisfaction, or job loss, students considered returning to school to improve their economic and job prospects. Important people around them supported their enrollment in college, creating a context in which the adults could (re)evaluate and resist educational identities formed earlier in life.

In a refinement of cultural (re)production theories, Fernandes (1988) articulated a theory of resistance, defining resistance as the "counter hegemonic social attitudes, behaviours, and actions which aim at weakening the classification among social categories" (p.174). Such attitudes and behaviors are directed toward those who exercise power and are aimed at redistribution of power to a more equitable system. The life

histories of participants illuminated the complex ways in which the "educated person" was produced within social institutions, while also illuminating the ways the person actively confronted the messages received in schools.

The narratives of first-generation, adult students provided evidence of resistance in the cultural production of the educated person. During their early educational experiences, these students did not have power or authority to actively resist the dominant ideology of the school, but as adults, resistance was possible. For example, Sally (white female, age 35) described difficulties she experienced in school due to an undiagnosed learning disability. She explained that she learned "work-arounds" to hide her learning disability and sometimes resorted to hiding in the bathroom during school. She described herself as "not deserving" to pass classes and as not caring about school. She eventually dropped out of high school when she was 15 and pregnant. However, as an adult, and before she enrolled in college herself, she discussed taking an active role in her son's education. She emphasized that she would not allow teachers to label him.

> . . . [M]y son went from making F's, and the teacher is like, "Oh, he's just a troublemaker." I'm like, "You call my kid that again and we have a problem." I'll call the teacher out in a heartbeat. I'm like, "No kid gets left behind. I don't know if you all understand what that means. Let me help you out." (Sally–white female, age 35)

Sally's earlier experiences in school, combined with experiences in other social institutions, influenced how she interacted with her son's school, actively confronting and resisting the dominant messages in the school. She understood the power of labeling students and refused to allow teachers to label her son "a troublemaker" because of learning difficulties. As a student, Sally did not have the power or the knowledge to actively confront teachers or the school; however, as a parent, she had more power and

knowledge, making resistance possible. She directed her rejection of these practices toward those who exercised power within the school: teachers.

One challenge of cultural (re)production theories is how to theorize and analyze multiple social identities such as class, gender, and race/ethnicity. Morrow and Torres (1998) critiqued cultural (re)production theories in education and found them unable to provide a dynamic process "for an analysis of interactions, interplay, and relationships between class, gender, and race in educational settings" (p.22). This finding led to increased focus on the interplay between sources of domination, mainly class, race, and gender.

Intersectionality is a framework for understanding interlocking systems of oppression (Collins 1991). Intersectional analysis is used to show how students' experiences are intertwined within systems of inequality. One of the advantages to using an intersectional approach is that it can uncover and allow the examination of privileged and oppressed identities that individuals can possess simultaneously. It can also allow analysis of the complexity of identities and the power structures in which they operate without essentializing groups or individuals (Bowleg 2008; Torres et al. 2009).

According to Torres et al. (2009), early scholars who explored social identities began by examining individual categories of identity, such as racial, gender, and sexual identity. These were often investigated in a way that failed to acknowledge the various ways in which identities intersect. Within lived experiences, a person experiences the intersection of various identities in unique ways. Often the result of trying to bridge social identities resulted in an additive approach rather than a more integrated approach.

In a critique of exploring individual social identities, Arnot (1982) cautioned that addressing gender differences in education without addressing class issues would result in boys and girls from low-income backgrounds facing similar disadvantages. The main argument of the study was that if gender equality is addressed without also addressing class-based inequality, then oppression based on class continues to affect boys and girls from working-class backgrounds. For example, college enrollment is no longer stratified by gender, although college majors and incomes continue to remain stratified by gender; however, college enrollment is still stratified by family income, race/ethnicity, and parents' educational attainment. So while some gender differences in educational attainment have declined significantly, differences in educational attainment based on social class has increased (Jones 2013). Noting that educational attainment stratification affects women and men in different ways is important. On average, women with only a high school diploma earn lower incomes than men with only a high school diploma earn. Earnings are also stratified by race/ethnicity, so low educational attainment has a greater effect on the income of women and ethnic minorities.

Torres et al. (2009) believed identifying the intersections of multiple identities was not enough. Instead, "multiple identities must be connected to the larger social structures in which they are embedded" (Torres et al. 2009:587). This approach highlights the ways "majority and minority identities interact and the reality that many individuals possess both privileged and oppressed identities" (p.587). Intersectionality begins with the lived experiences of marginalized groups in theory development, explores the complexities and variations in individual identities, illuminates the power structures

that organize and maintain inequality, and promotes social change to encourage social justice.

The life-history narratives of first-generation, adult women and men of different race/ethnic backgrounds suggested they shared a common oppression based on social class. Early educational experiences highlighted similarities in school contexts that fostered the development of disadvantageous educational identities. Disengagement from school and negative feelings about high school were themes that appeared in most of the narratives, regardless of gender or race. However, students' experiences did varied, based on the intersections of multiple identities.

Three participants described examples of peer victimization during their early educational experiences. Their stories were unique to each of them, but reflected larger structural influences of class, race, and gender inequality. The students shared a common experience of peer victimization during elementary school the adults within the social context of the school ignored and allowed to happen. Teachers either did not know the bullying was taking place or knew, but decided not to do anything about the peer victimization.

Two of the victims of bullying were female students. Other researchers found that adults often did not recognize the peer victimization of girls because of behaviors and expectations related to female gender roles. Osler (2006) discussed the role of gender on the experience of peer victimization. Teachers regularly fail to recognize the impact of exclusion from peer groups on academic engagement and achievement. Part of the reason adults do not recognize exclusion is because when girls experience difficulties in school, the girls often hide the pain because of the ways girls tend to respond to difficulties. The

problems are not always obvious because the girls may be withdrawn, but are not actively causing trouble in class or school. Violence is narrowly defined as physical aggression, a definition that frequently excludes the ways in which girls in school experience violence. The lack of recognition of peer victimization by teachers and other school officials is embedded in the structures of social class, student ranking, and gender role expectations.

The other participant who discussed peer victimization was Mark, a bi-racial male. He related that he was often in fights during elementary school because of harassment he received based on his racial identity. The peer victimization he experienced included physical violence, which is more often associated with male students. Racism was an additional source of his peer victimization. Because he was a member of a racial minority group, his experience of peer victimization varied from that of the students who identified as white. According to Tatum (1997), experiencing racism during childhood is a significant event in the racial identity development process for minority children and adolescents. The process varies based on racial identity and social contexts. For Mark, the experience of peer victimization was unique to him, but was influenced by social structures of race and gender.

All three students experienced peer victimization. The similarities and differences within the narratives demonstrated how multiple identities interacted within similar experiences. Torres et al. (2009) reasoned that a central issue in studying identity in the next decade would be resolving the tension between understanding the whole identity without ignoring its distinctive parts.

One way to analyze the intersections of multiple identities is by examining the social structures of organizations, including educational institutions. Acker (2006)

conceptualized the intersections of class, gender, and race inequality in organizations through the concept of *inequality regimes*. Inequality regimes includes "the interlocked practices and processes that result in continuing inequalities in all work organizations" (Acker 2006:441). Previous analysis of organizations tended to focus on one area of inequality, but using the concept of inequality regimes enables examination of the complex, interconnected, and mutually reinforcing processes that reproduce inequality.

Applying the concept of inequality regimes to educational organizations allows the analysis of the interconnected processes within educational institutions that reproduce inequality based on race, class, and gender. Acker (2006) defined inequality in organizations as including systematic disparities in power, control, resources, outcomes, decision-making, opportunities, security, and enjoyment. While the analysis centered on disparities within the workforce, other researchers could easily apply the concept of inequality regimes to schools and could include students as well as faculty in the analysis. The experiences discussed by first-generation, adult students revealed systemic disparities of power, control, resources, outcomes, decision-making, opportunities, security, and enjoyment. Participants believed they had little control or power, many did not have a sense of security in the school environment, and few related experiences of enjoyment during early schooling.

Inequality based on class is generally intertwined with race and gender because of historical and cultural segregation of jobs and wages based on these socially constructed categories. Charles, Roscigno, and Torres (2007) demonstrated how economic stratification and racial stratification systems intertwined by investigating racial and ethnic inequalities in college enrollment. The number of black high school graduates who

attend college is only half that of white high school graduates, and has decreased since the 1970s. The authors argued that college attendance gaps were largely explained by economic stratification at the family level. Racial differences in college enrollment were largely explained by family income and wealth inequality. Because of historical economic systems of discrimination, African American families tended to have less wealth and lower incomes than white families did and were less likely to have attended college. The source of college enrollment difference is economic disadvantage, and economic (dis)advantage is stratified by race.

In a similar study, Zhan and Sherraden (2011) attempted to explain racial disparities in college enrollment by examining family financial assets and liabilities. After they controlled for family income and savings, most of the racial differences in college enrollment were eliminated. The authors concluded that economic inequalities based on race/ethnicity explained the lower college enrollment for minority groups.

One of the advantages of an intersectional framework was that it exposed the commonalities between systems of inequality. Low-income students shared common experiences and outcomes within school contexts, though some experiences differed based on the socio-historical position of multiple social identities such as race and gender.

The narratives of first-generation, adult students also highlighted the ways that systems of inequality could harm both those who experienced advantages and those who experienced disadvantages within the system. Some participants discussed teacher favoritism based on athletic ability. Eva remembered how she felt and the harm that teacher favoritism toward athletes created for her and other students.

> Football players were top of the list. Football players, cheerleaders . . . They got away with murder. I mean, if they were in class, fine. If they weren't, they still pass. You know? And it would make you sick to see how they treated them, especially if that coach taught a class. Well 90 percent of the football players were in that class. . . .They were treated like royalty at school. And if you didn't play football or cheerleader or even their dance squad, forget it. They were like royalty at school and the rest of us were like their peasants. . . . We were treated just like a peasant would be treated. We got the bare minimum from them. Unless you switched over to a sport, and then you were okay. (Eva–Hispanic female, age 39)

When asked how this affected her and other students, Eva replied:

> It hurt us. We had to struggle to teach ourselves out of that book that the teacher was putting out. (Eva–Hispanic female, age 39)

Eva experienced disadvantages within the school context based on a system of inequality that favored athletic ability. However, this same system of inequality negatively affected those who benefitted from teacher favoritism. Marcy and Sally were both aware of the favoritism they received based on athleticism, but it led them to believe they did not have the academic aptitude to pass classes or continue their education in college.

> On the actually doing the schoolwork, they kind of just overlooked me and just kept on . . . I was good at sports, so they just passed me over. I really believe that's why I passed. (Marcy–white female, age 37)

> Yeah, that's why I got passed. . . , Literally, I should have never been passed, I safely say, from the fourth to the fifth grade, because I did miserably and yet I did [pass] because I was in track and basketball and I did very well. I took first in every track meet. So they just let me go. (Sally–white female, age 35)

The advantage to exploring intersectionality and the social contexts in which inequality exists is that it illuminated systemic sources of inequality and the cost of inequality to those in the system. Rather than focus on individual attributes and outcomes, we can address the social processes that (re)produce inequality in society.

The main argument of cultural (re)production theories was supported by the findings in this research. Schools are important cultural sites where people receive messages about who they are within schools and society. Students also receive messages about their aptitudes within educational institutions, which they internalize and meld with their educational identities. Disadvantageous educational identities influence students' decisions to enroll in college directly after high school, thereby (re)producing the educational attainment of their parents. Cultural (re)production theories provide an approach for understanding the influence of educational experiences in the educational identities of students and the contributions of these experiences to (re)producing the economic situations of their family of origin. By analyzing the influence of school context on students' sense of self as learners, we can reframe educational attainment stratification. The transformations to educational identities further demonstrated that educational identities are not fixed or static. Life experiences and interactions within different social contexts, including the context of higher education, creates the social space where adults can (re)evaluate and resist early educational identities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the outcomes of this study, I propose two recommendations to direct future research. The first recommendation is that school reforms aimed at promoting educational equality should include evaluations and transformations of the social context of schools. The second recommendation is to incorporate the concept of educational identity into models of college enrollment stratification. The social context of schools is an important cultural site in which students learn messages about their educational

aptitudes and place in the world. The school context is an important factor in looking at school engagement, peer culture, and student-adult relationships.

Most of the participants in this study discussed disengagement from academics sometime during their early educational experiences. In a review of the research, Kelly (2009) pointed out that lack of school engagement was linked to low academic achievement and attainment. In studies on student values and engagement, researchers found that poverty and low academic tracking were related to lower levels of engagement. Kelly (2009) observed that such studies could not rule out the school context and student perceptions of opportunity. Separating the low-engaging context (school and instruction) from student identities is difficult. For example, students labeled as low-track are channeled into classrooms that tend to emphasize memorization, order, and rules, providing low levels of unity between lessons and students' lives. Disengagement is a response to disengaging instruction.

In a similar critique of research on student engagement, Zyngier (2008) questioned the predominant definitions of student engagement. The dominant definition of school engagement tended to have a behavioral focus. School engagement includes doing the work assigned, showing interest in school and class, and displaying motivation and effort. Limiting the definition of school engagement to these aspects shows a tendency to essentialize engagement as a product of the individual. Engagement becomes something that students do and teachers plan for them. Narrowly defining engagement as students becoming involved in teacher-initiated activities suggests that engaged students are due to the teachers' efforts, but disengaged students are because of the students' deficits.

Zyngier (2008) advanced that the dominant definition of school engagement was problematic for several reasons. One problem was that, using this definition, students from backgrounds most similar to the dominant school culture tended to be more engaged. Students could behave in ways viewed as engaged, but may in fact be passively compliant or ritualistically engaged. High academic performance does not necessarily equal engagement. Some attempts at improving engagement using a behavioral model is to make lessons fun. Zyngier (2008) argued that just making a lesson fun was not engaging. Instead, learning should be something over which students have ownership and should empower them to make a difference in their lives.

When first-generation, adult students described the learning experiences most valuable to them, they related stories of learning that was relevant, having ownership in the topics researched, thinking in new ways, and having caring teachers. These positive descriptions starkly contrasted with those from early educational experiences where they experienced little relevance, rigid rules, peer victimization, and academic neglect. The negative experiences in elementary and high school were related to school disengagement and academic performance.

Zyngier (2008) declared school engagement "forms the basis for social, cultural, political, and intellectual participation in life within and beyond school" (p.1771). Using a critical-transformative definition of engagement, he recommended that learning should be

> Connecting–to and engaging with the students' cultural knowledge
> Owning–all students should be able to see themselves as represented in the work
> Responding–to students' lived experiences and actively and consciously critiquing that experience

> Empowering–students with a belief that what they will make a difference to their lives and the opportunity to voice and discover their own authentic and authoritative life. (Zyngier 2008;1773)

In an evaluation of student engagement in a school system, researchers and administrators need to include an analysis of the school context. Rather than focus on individual attributes that contribute to disengagement, evaluations should center on the degree to which schools are connecting with, responding to, and empowering students. Zyngier (2008) pointed out the importance of asking students if they are engaged in order to evaluate student engagement. Students often are left out of conversations about how to improve student engagement, and only students can tell us if they are engaged in their education and if learning is culturally sensitive and relevant to their lives.

The social context of schools includes a peer culture related to academic engagement and achievement. The peer culture of a school can either help or hinder academic achievement. The research on peer relationships and academic adjustment has begun to gain attention (Ryan 2011). Peer culture includes not just one's immediate peer group, but also an overall perception of peer interactions within the school. Schools have unique peer cultures that affect individual student engagement and achievement. Peer culture includes acceptable behaviors and attitudes, student interactions and relationships, and students' perceptions of the interactions and relationships. A hostile and negative peer culture is associated with low academic achievement and engagement (Lynch et al. 2013).

When evaluating peer culture, looking at the whole social context, including excluded and marginalized students, is essential. Lynch et al. (2013) maintained that the effect of peers in school should be expanded to include peers with whom individuals may

not have any contact. A part of peer culture includes the presence of peer victimization in the school.

Evidence suggests that improving school climates to reduce victimization is important to improving school-wide academic performance. Teachers play an important role in establishing a positive or negative climate for bullying in schools. Schools need to invest in training school administrators, teachers, and parents in recognizing and intervening when peer victimization is present in the school, because of its adverse effect on students' self-concept and academic performance (Espelage et al. 2013).

The narratives of first-generation, adult students demonstrated how teachers at the school often maintained and supported peer culture, either formally or informally. When evaluating the social context of schools, reformers should also evaluate student-adult relationships in the school. The relationships (or lack thereof) were important factors related to early educational experiences of the participants. Student perceptions about their academic abilities and belongingness were affected when the students perceived teachers as uncaring, neglectful, or showing favoritism.

Rodriguez (2008) examined the concept of caring in student-adult relationships at school from the student perspective and declared the student perspective in schools was important to recognizing their humanity. Similarly, Noddings (1992) indicated that caring should be understood from the student perspective. The experience of inhabiting the same social space together does not automatically equal caring relationships. Such relationships must be built and the student's perspective of caring examined.

Rodriguez (2008) concluded that recognition of the humanity of students by teachers led to healthy student-adult relationships that helped develop the student's sense

of self within the school. Students discussed the important effects of teacher-student relationships on their attitudes about school and future educational aspirations. The most important aspects of the adult-student relationship included adults in school knowing them, talking to them, engaging with them, and encouraging them. Students believed it was important for adults in school to recognize student issues outside academics and the school. In this way, the adults acknowledged the students' humanity.

To address the issue of adult-student relationships in school, Rodriguez (2008) suggested that teachers and administrators analyze the relationships with students in their school by asking how teachers are recognizing students, talking to students, and encouraging students beyond their limits. The relationships should be evaluated to assess the ways in which teachers know students academically and personally and whether the relationships are comfortable to the students involved. The relationship between teachers and students needs to be developed to realize the transformative potential of education.

Luttrell (1997) reached a similar conclusion from the life-histories of women enrolled in an adult literacy program. The student/teacher relationships tended to be a key factor in the ways the women understood themselves as learners. Because of this finding, Luttrell suggested conducting more research on teachers identified as successful or exemplary. Additionally, teachers needed to reconsider the ways in which they exercised authority in the classroom. In particular, a focus on controlling students sent messages of "good" and "bad" students and influenced students' social identity. Luttrell's focus was not to blame teachers, but rather to focus on school mission. Teachers provide caregiving and emotional labor in the classroom and Luttrell suggested such contributions be recognized and valued in the organization and mission of schools.

The school context is an important location in which students receive messages about their educational abilities and self-worth. School engagement, peer culture, and student-teacher relationships are all important factors in academic achievement and attainment. Current attempts at education reform focus on a narrow idea of testing and encourages the climate of rote, repetitive, meaningless learning.

I agree with Rubin (2007), who concluded that schools need to create a world in which "learning is constituted as creative, stimulating, relevant and meaningful" (p.244). A classroom in this world would "validate students as learners, encouraging, participating, and reiterating the belief that students' ideas are worthwhile and their learning is important and purposeful" (p.244). Many forms of intelligence need support and nurturing. Each student's life experiences should be valued and teachers should be respectful of the student's humanity. Rather than view student failure as a product of the student's deficiencies, the findings make a good case for how the school context affects what is available to learn. The answers have consequences to the students' learner identities.

The findings suggested a need to incorporate the concept of educational identity into models of college enrollment stratification. For the purpose of this study, educational identity was defined as the individual's understanding of who he or she is through the meaning attached to subjective experiences within educational institutions and the experience of social position within educational institutions (Moore 2006). Educational identities form through interaction and interpretation of meaning, and therefore are continually reinterpreted and modified by social interactions over time (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000).

Educational identities allow consideration of connections with the wider social context in which learners are located, the subjective meanings attached to learning, and transformations over time. Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) maintained that educational identity could not be understood outside of the social and cultural context of the learner's life. The narratives of first-generation, adult students supported the notion that educational identity is connected to early educational experiences in the social context of schooling. Disadvantageous educational identities contributed to the participants deciding not to enroll in college shortly after high school graduation. Educational identity formed in early schooling was a factor in college enrollment stratification. The study findings showed one way in which economic inequality is reproduced by social systems.

Earning a college degree has clear employment and income advantages. Young adults (ages 25-34) with at least a bachelor's degree were employed full time at a higher percentage than their peers with lower levels of education, and higher educational attainment is associated with higher median earnings (Aud et al. 2011). The income stratification between those with a bachelor's degree or higher and those without a high school diploma increased between 1995 and 2010 (Aud et al. 2011).

Jones (2013) pointed out that, even with all the improvements in access to college enrollment, inequality still exists for low-income students and those from racial/ethnic minority groups. The need is essential to continue to develop new strategies and programs to reach out and support such potential students and their families to provide more equitable access to higher education. To increase access to all, we should not focus on narrow parts of the whole process, such as awareness and preparation (Jones 2013).

Areas not addressed by increased awareness and access to financial aid are issues of educational identity and educational disengagement during high school.

Perna and Kurban (2013) identified four categories of college-enrollment predictors based on prior research: financial resources, academic preparation and achievement, support from significant others, and knowledge and information about college and financial aid. The narratives of first-generation, adult students revealed belief systems related to educational identity that prevented them from enrolling in college. Educational identity issues were layered within each of the four categories identified by Perna and Kurban. For example, students from low-income families (financial resources) reported schooling experiences that led them to believe they lacked academic skills and they did not belong in educational settings. The school context and educational identity influenced school engagement, which influenced academic performance and achievement.

Relationships with teachers at the school were problematic or nonexistent, so support for college enrollment was not realized in the school setting. Most of the students interviewed did not seek knowledge or information about college and financial aid because they did not believe they belonged in a college environment. Including an analysis of educational identities in educational decision-making provides a way to address emotions related to schooling and college enrollment.

Many studies of college enrollment decision-making used the human capital model to explain the decision to attend college. The assumption was that students weighed the perceived costs and the perceived benefits and made a logical decision based on this analysis. The human capital model for explaining college enrollment decisions is

incomplete if it does not consider identity issues, which could be emotionally based. Life-history narratives illuminated the complex emotions that surrounded memories of schooling, educational identities, and educational decision-making. Participants reflected upon and evaluated the memories and emotions when they later enrolled in college as adults.

To reduce college enrollment stratification, Perna and Kurban (2013) pointed to aspects of the high school environment that affected student academic preparation and achievement. They proposed that schools evaluate the availability of rigorous courses, the procedures used to determine who attends such courses, and the availability of college-related information. Perna and Kurban (2013) suggested that policymakers should promote the availability of rigorous coursework in schools serving low-income and minority families. The findings of this research suggested the availability of rigorous coursework in high school might not address the factors that lead low-income and minority students to become disengaged in schooling at early ages. I propose that any evaluation of the high school environment also include analysis of the factors that cause students to develop disadvantageous educational identities. The high school environment may hinder students from low-income families from developing an identity that could benefit from rigorous courses and information about college.

The social advantages to increases in college degree attainment include increases in productivity. Such increases appear among those without degrees as well as those who earned degrees in social settings where more people have earned college degrees. Other social advantages include increased revenue from sales, property, and income taxes; lower use of public assistance; and lower crime and incarceration rates. Those who

graduate from college are also more likely to vote, to be knowledgeable about issues, and to volunteer in their communities than are those who did not graduate from college (Hout 2012).

## CONCLUSION

This research was an examination of how educational identity was formed and transformed within educational institutions over the lifespan and how the decisions were related to decisions about education. The research described the social construction of educational identity from the standpoint of participants. The life-history approach allowed me to analyze how educational identities formed, the influence of these educational identities on educational decision-making, and sites that made educational identity transformations possible. The findings in this research provided insight into cultural (re)production theories and intersectional perspectives in education.

Based on the findings, I propose that school reforms include the social context of schools in evaluations of student engagement, peer culture, and student-teacher relationships. Additionally, models designed to explain college enrollment stratification need to include the concept of educational identity. Inclusion of disadvantageous educational identities into models of college enrollment stratification offers an emotional component to explanations of college enrollment decision-making.

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## APPENDIX A:

## INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: Adult Student Educational Narratives and Identity: An Intersectional Analysis

Investigator: Natalee Tucker, B.S., M.S., M.L.A.

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to gain an understanding about how you and other adult students came to enrolling in a college degree program. I am interested in your early experiences in educational institutions and the meaning these experiences had for you. This is a research study designed at understanding how educational identities are constructed by individuals. You are being asked to participate in this research because you have recently enrolled in a college degree program and are considered an adult student.

Procedures: In a semi-structured interview format, you will be asked to answer a series of questions regarding your experiences in educational institutions. The questions will cover your early memories of schooling and the meaning these experiences had for you and your current decision to enroll in college. This will take approximately one hour. I will audio-tape this interview, to transcribe it later. With your permission, I may contact you after the interview if I need clarification on any information you provided.

Risks of Participation: There are no known risks associated with this project that are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

Benefits: Participation in this study will allow you to tell your unique educational story in a semi-structured personal interview. Your story may allow sociologists and education professionals to understand the experiences of first-generation adult students to help and support others in their educational journey.

Confidentiality: Participation in this study is voluntary. There is no penalty to you for discontinuing the interview, and a decision to discontinue the interview and participation in this study can be made at any time during interview.

Several precautions to ensure the confidentiality of participants are in place. These precautions include that all documents including tape-recorded interviews that identify the subjects will be destroyed upon completion of the research. While research is being

conducted, sensitive materials will be kept in a private and secure environment. The identities of the individuals will be disguised with pseudonyms on the interview recording, as the interviews are transcribed, and as the findings are reported. In order for the researcher to match real identity with pseudonyms, a coding sheet will be kept in a locked file cabinet at the researcher's residential office and in a locked file cabinet at the researcher's professional office. These coding sheets will be destroyed upon completion of the research. Any written results will discuss group findings or use pseudonyms of respondents. This information will not include information that will identify you. Personal stories will be presented in publication as patterns that emerge out of the stories. Focusing on the patterns that emerge and the similarities stories will allow for added confidentiality. Because the research will be reported as commonalties between stories, individual subjects will not be identified.

Research records will be stored securely on a non-networked computer, and only researchers and individuals responsible for research oversight will have access to the records. Transcription professionals will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement that involves destruction of all electronic files containing study-related documents upon completion of the services. It is possible that the consent process and data collection will be observed by research oversight staff responsible for safeguarding the rights and wellbeing of people who participate in research.

Contacts: If you have any questions about the research contact:

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If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer, you may contact Dr. Shelia Kennison, IRB Chair, xxx, Stillwater, OK 74078, xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxx @xxx.xxx

Participation in this study is voluntary and you can discontinue the research activity at any time without reprisal or penalty.

Signatures:

I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form has been given to me.

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

_____ _____

Signature of Researcher Date

APPENDIX B:

INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Adult Student Educational Narratives and Identity: An Intersectional Analysis

P.I. Natalee Tucker xxx @xxx.xxx

The purpose of this interview is to gain an understanding about how you came to enrolling in a college degree program. I am interested in your early experiences in educational institutions and the meaning these experiences had for you. I will begin with a few questions about your current college enrollment and the decision-making process that brought you to enroll. Then, we will go back in time to your earliest memories of schooling. We will take a tour of your educational experiences over time, and then return to your college experience.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. These first questions are about your current enrollment in college.
    a. Where are you enrolled in college?
    b. Approximately how many credit hours are you currently enrolled in?
    c. What courses are you currently taking?
    d. Which courses that you have taken so far have you enjoyed the most?
    e. What about this (these) courses did/do you enjoy?
2. These next questions are about how you came to the decision to enroll in college.
    a. How long did you think about enrolling in college before you actually enrolled?

b. Tell me about the decision-making process that brought you to enroll in college at the time that you did.
    i. What other people did you talk to about this decision?
    ii. Was there a significant event that made you want to enroll when you did? If so, what was it? What did it mean to you?
c. Tell me about your feelings at the time you enrolled, when your college enrollment became "official" to you.

3. Now we are going to go back in time to your earliest experiences in school. I want you to think about the elementary school you went to, the teachers, and the other children.
    a. Focusing on teaching and learning, how would you describe your early schooling experiences (elementary)?
    b. Can you describe a specific experience (or experiences) that defined how you felt about school?
    c. What specific words come to mind when you think about your experience in elementary school?
        i. Tell me about _____.
    d. How would you describe your relationship with teachers in school?
    e. How would you describe the relationship your parents had with teachers at school?
    f. How would you describe your relationships with peers in school?
    g. Overall, did you "like" elementary school? Why or why not?
    h. How would you describe yourself as a student in elementary school?

i. Take me on a tour of the elementary school you attended as a child.
    i. What did a typical classroom look like?
    ii. Where did teachers sit? Where did students sit?

4. Now we are going to move forward to your experiences in high school. I want you to think about the high school you went to, the teachers, and the other students.
    a. Focusing on teaching and learning, how would you describe your schooling experiences as you moved into high school?
    b. Can you describe specific experiences that defined how you felt about school?
    c. What specific words come to mind when you think about your experiences in high school?
    d. How would you describe your relationship with teachers in high school?
    e. How would you describe the relationship your parents had with teachers in high school?
    f. How would you describe your relationships with peers in high school?
    g. Overall, did you "like" high school? Explain.
    h. How would you describe yourself as a student in high school?
5. Now I am going to ask you some general questions about the meaning of being a student and how teachers categorize students.
    a. What did/does it mean to you to be a "good student"? "poor student"? "average"?
        i. Who influenced your perspectives about these definitions? How?

b. Tell me how you think teachers (or other school officials) categorized students?

    i. In what ways were you made aware of these categories?

    ii. What meaning did you attach to these categories?

6. Now I am going to ask you some questions about your parent's attitudes about education or schooling.

    a. How would you describe your parent's attitudes about education?

    b. In what ways did your parent's attitudes affect how you felt or thought about school?

    c. Where do you think your parent's attitudes came from?

    d. In what ways did your parents support or discourage education?

    e. Tell me about other people, besides your parents, who influenced your beliefs or feelings about school.

7. Now I want you to think about the time of your high school graduation and the circumstances surrounding the decisions you made about your schooling at that time.

    a. What circumstances affected your ability or choice to continue schooling after finishing high school?

    b. Did you consider attending college directly after college? Why or why not?

    c. Why, ultimately, did you decide not to attend college directly after high school?

    d. How did you feel about this choice?

8. Now let's return to your enrollment in college and the meanings it has for you.
    a. Tell me about the circumstances leading up to your enrollment in college now.
    b. Tell me about the thoughts and feelings you have about enrolling in college.
    c. What does "college degree" mean to you?
        i. What does it mean to you to be a "college student?"
        ii. What does it mean to you to be a "college graduate?"
    d. Describe any challenges you faced based on your enrollment in a college degree program.
        i. How did you overcome challenges?
        ii. What, if anything, would improve your college experience?
    e. Focusing on teaching and learning, how would you describe your schooling experiences as a college student?
    f. Can you describe specific experiences that defined how you feel about college?
    g. What specific words come to mind when you think about your experiences in college?
    h. How would you describe your relationship with teachers in college?
    i. How would you describe your relationships with peers in college?
    j. How has enrollment in college affected your other family/friend relationships?
    k. Overall, do you "like" college? Explain.

l. How would you describe yourself as a student in college?

m. Do you have feelings from early educational experiences that still affect how you perceive your current experiences in school? Explain.

n. Overall, how has enrollment in college affected you? Your perception of yourself or others?

9. Tell me about your future educational and career goals.

10. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your schooling experiences?

Thank you for your time and for answering these questions.

VITA

Natalee Danea Tucker

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: EDUCATIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION AND TRANSFORMATIONS: LIFE-HISTORY ANALYSIS OF FIRST-GENERATION, ADULT COLLEGE STUDENTS

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