A BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS:
ADULTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF FOR-PROFIT EDUCATION AS A Viable CHOICE

Adrianne Flack
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Supervisor of Dissertation:
________________________
H. Gerald Campano, Associate Professor of Education

Dean, Graduate School of Education:
________________________
Pam L. Grossman, Dean and Professor

Dissertation Committee:
H. Gerald Campano, Associate Professor of Education
Laura W. Perna, Professor of Education
Betsy R. Rymes, Associate Professor of Education
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Dedication

I dedicate this work to Maggielene Flack, my mother.

Her sacrifices and commitment to my positive development are foundational
to any and all of my achievements in life.
Acknowledgements

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:13)

First and foremost, I give thanks to God for making the opportunity of earning a doctorate even possible for me, and second, for seeing me through the completion of this goal. Without a doubt, I have grown spiritually as well as intellectually throughout this process.

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Dr. Susan Lytle and Dr. Larry Sipe were both instrumental to my progression in the program in the early years. Susan, thank you for providing some of the most incredible learning experiences I have ever had. You are a masterful teacher and scholar. It is because of your courses that I could even conceptualize this study as I did. Likewise, Dr. Vivian Gadsden helped me early on to think outside the box in using literacy and language frameworks. Thank you, Vivian, for inspiring me in this way. Although he is no longer with us, there remains a deep gratitude for the care that Dr. Sipe showed toward me. Aside from being an amazing scholar, he was simply a wonderful man.

To my dissertation committee, Dr. H. G. Campano, Dr. L. Perna, and Dr. B. Rymes, you were my dream team as I was hashing out my proposal idea. Gerald, I cannot thank you enough for the generous support you have consistently provided me. You have been a superb critical friend when I needed such feedback, and an immensely supportive cheerleader of my scholarly interests since I met you. I feel both blessed and honored to have worked with you. And I especially thank you for helping me get funding support. Dr. Perna, it goes without saying that you are a prolific scholar. However, your accessibility to support burgeoning scholars is noteworthy. You always gave me your time and attention when I asked for it, and I feel so privileged to have had your feedback and advice as I explored this topic. Dr. Rymes, thank you for introducing me to the world of discourse analysis. Your class just set me ablaze and remains one of my favorite courses. You are an awesome teacher and researcher. As such, I have always appreciated your insightful and enthusiastic comments to my work. You have helped to foster my scholarly identity more than you probably realize.
To the fabulous administrative team at RWL and Educational Linguistics, Penny Creedon, Lorraine Hightower, Suzanne Oh, Paula Rogers, and Mary Schlesinger, thank you for everything that you do! You all are so supportive of students and have assisted me in numerous ways. Indeed, you contributed to making my time at GSE a positive experience.

Last, but not least, I owe a huge thank you to the individuals who voluntarily shared their stories with me. It was an honor to meet each of you and to learn from you. I hope that I have done justice in narrating your journeys in a way that dignifies the courageousness I saw in you. Without your willingness to be a part of this study, I would not have a dissertation—certainly not this one—the one that I really wanted to do. I also hope that you have acquired the desires you shared with me. To my contact, “Jordan”, thank you for making a way for me to conduct this study. I am eternally grateful. You said yes when I really needed to hear that word. I also owe a special thank you to Julani Ghana, Judy Ortiz, Thomas Butler, Paige Walker, Diane Sandefur, Terri White, and Kate Hyzer for their helpful assistance.
ABSTRACT

A BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS: ADULTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF FOR-PROFIT EDUCATION AS A VIABLE CHOICE

Adrianne Flack
H. Gerald Campano

This qualitative study, which uses a narrative research approach informed by Riessman’s (2008) work, explores the “college choice” experience of seven adult students, age 25 and older, who pursue postsecondary education at a non-degree granting, less-than-two-year private for-profit institution in the Philadelphia metropolitan area. My conceptual framework blends together post-structural and critical theories of literacy, college choice scholarship, and literature about for-profit education in examining how and why students take an educational pathway that counters two prevailing social discourses about postsecondary education: the first of which pertains to the college for all movement that situates 4-year degree attainment as a universal goal, and second, the discourse of for-profit education as an undesirable institutional type. My findings revealed the following several factors influenced participants’ decision making in selecting a sub-baccalaureate program at a non-degree granting, private for-profit institution: the economy, academic readiness, program length of study, travel distance to school, school representatives’ responsiveness to their inquiries, perceived access to employers via school, age, and the dearth of support available to guide adults’ decision making. Using James Gee’s notion of discourses/Discourses along with discourse analytic tools and strategies advocated in
Wortham and Rymes’s work, this research also explored how the term “for-profit education” is understood differently by a wide array of individuals. Related to the issue of nomenclature, I also examined the way in which the institution in this study portrays itself to consumers. My findings with regard to the languaging of “for-profit” education revealed that the meaning of this term is not commonly understood, thus complicating the value of using such a descriptor to identify this sector of postsecondary education. In conclusion, the notion of “for-profit education” was not a factor in participants’ decision making. Further, this study illuminates important considerations about the intersectionality of age with other factors in making educational choices, suggesting that adulthood cannot be looked upon as a homogenous category. Thus practitioners, policy makers and researchers should pay attention to where individuals fall on the continuum of adulthood to best support their career and educational needs.
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DEFINITION OF TERMS

For-Profit Institutions: The National Center for Education Statistics define for-profit institutions as “a private institution in which the individual(s) or agency in control receives compensation other than wages, rent, or other expenses for the assumption of risk” (IPEDS 2015-2016 Survey Materials Glossary, 8/24/2015).

Proprietary Institutions: This term is used interchangeably to reference “for-profit” post-secondary institutions.

Sub-baccalaureate Education: Sub-baccalaureate education are educational programs at the postsecondary level which lead to a credential that is below a bachelor’s degree (e.g., a diploma, certificate, certification, and associate’s degrees). The focus of this research is specifically in regard to certificate programs, in which a non-degree award (i.e., a diploma) is conferred to students for completing an educational program of study in a postsecondary context (Torpey, 2012). In Sykes’s (2012, p. 1) report produced for the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative for the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), sub-baccalaureate certificate programs are categorized as short-term, moderate-term, or long-term according to a program’s completion schedule, which may be framed in terms of academic years, clock hours, or credit hours needed to complete as described below:

Short-term certificates:

- Less than 1 academic year
  Less than 900 clock hours, less than 30 semester credit hours, or less than 45 quarter credit hours.

Moderate-term certificates:

- At least 1 but less than 2 academic years
  At least 900 but less than 1,800 clock hours, at least 30 but less than 60 semester credit hours, or at least 45 but less than 90 quarter hours.

Long-term certificates:

- At least 2 but less than 4 academic years;
  1,800 or more clock hours, 60 or more semester credit hours, or 90 or more quarter hours. (Sykes, 2012, p.1)

Note: A certification, however, differs from earning an educational certificate/diploma in occupational training. According to the IPEDS Glossary, a certificate is “a formal award certifying the successful completion of a postsecondary education program.” According to Federal Interagency Working Group on Expanded Measures of Enrollment and
Attainment (GEMEnA), certification, however, is “a credential awarded by a certification body based on an individual demonstrating through an examination process that he or she has acquired the designated knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform a specific job…Certification is a time-limited credential that is renewed through a recertification process” (Ewert & Kominski, 2014, p. 2). In contrast, educational certificates are typically awarded without any terms of expiration.

**Adult vs. Non-traditional Student**

In this report I opted to use the term “adult” as opposed to “non-traditional student,” which is the commonly used nomenclature that serves as a catchall for a host of characteristics which distinguish persons different from traditional-age college goers (e.g., age 18-23, full-time, bachelor’s degree candidate). Given that adults over age 25 are substantially represented in postsecondary education today, using marginalizing language seems inappropriate in referring to their status. Second, rather than focus on variables of whether students have children or claim military status, my focus was to examine how individuals who have been separated from secondary school navigate their way into postsecondary education without the customary supports typically available to high school students (i.e., guidance counselors, attention from recruiters at school, college access programs). In a perfect world, high school usually offer guidance and other programs to move students on to postsecondary education or work.

---

1 I realize that these supports are not necessarily provided everywhere. In fact, the School District of Philadelphia actually terminated most of its guidance counselor in 2013 due to a budget deficit. Secondly, it was discovered that college preparation and support was not even on guidance staff’s job descriptions, although many guidance personnel fulfilled that role.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of post-secondary education has long been persuasively touted as a necessity for individual survival and prosperity, as well as a necessity in maintaining the democratic ideals of our national heritage, and further, our leadership position in the world. Over the last forty years, in particular, there has been a foreboding warning that we must increase the education of our citizenry if we are to meet the impending demands of the 21st century (Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010; Rose, 2012; Rosenbaum, 2001, Perna, 2013). In the 1960s, some of the most important legislation was enacted to make college attendance a reality for all people despite their economic means and other background characteristics, in order to meet these impending challenges. Hence, the gateway to the college-for-all movement was launched.

Between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s, open enrollment policies in concert with affirmative action policies emanating from the 1964 Civil Rights legislation and the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA), created prolific access to higher education for the first time in U.S. history for many under-represented groups such as African Americans, Latinos, and women (Trivett, 1975; Shaughnessy, 1977; Perna, 2006). And although the educational progress of most groups have improved (particularly women as a whole), successful participation in higher education among African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and the poor, in general, remains an unrealized goal (Bergerson, 2009; Kena, et al., 2015; Perna, 2013).
Using data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS: 2002), the U.S. Department of Education’s 2015 *Condition of Education* report reveals that 60% of students from high-socioeconomic (SES) households attained at least a bachelor’s degree, whereas only 14% of students from low-SES families and 29% of students from middle-SES families achieved this as a minimum credential (Kena et al., 2015). With regard to the attainment of associate’s degrees, 8% of low-SES students, 10% percent of middle-SES students, and 7% of students from high-SES families achieved this education level. In sum, within this cohort of students, 67% of students from high-SES families acquired a postsecondary credential in contrast to only 22% of students from low-SES families and 39% of students from middle-SES families (Kena et al., 2015).

With regard to race, *The Condition of Education* (2015) reports that bachelor’s degree holders amongst 25- to 29-year-olds between the period of 1990-2014 grew from 13-22% for Blacks, 8-15% for Hispanics, 43-61% for Asian and Pacific Islanders, and from 26-41% for Whites. While Asian and Pacific Islanders continue to make the greatest strides with regard to postsecondary education, the lag in progress is notable for African American and Hispanic communities in attaining what many scholars and policy makers highlight as the preferred education credential needed to attain a middle class lifestyle—now more than ever (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013; Pew Charitable Trusts, 2015a). Despite an ambitious movement to increase four-year college degree attainment in the U.S., achieving this goal has been slow (Bergerson, 2009; Perna, 2013).

As it has long been believed that education was the route to upward mobility, the fact that significant educational disparities remain amid a rapidly changing workforce is
concerning to an array of scholars, government leaders, policy makers, and on-the-ground education advocates and practitioners. Subsequently, these outcomes have led researchers to speculate the reasons for why low educational attainment persists among particular groups (Bergerson, 2009; Perna, 2006). The primary reasons attributed to low-SES, Black, Hispanic, and Native American students’ continued under-representation in bachelor degree attainment (and assumed subsequent social inequity) has been theorized as a matter of college affordability (Perna, 2006; Perna & Finney, 2014; Tierney & Colyar, 2009), inadequate assistance with and information about student financial aid (e.g., Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Callahan, 2009; Finney, 2008; Perna, 2006, 2013), a lack of academic preparation (e.g., Adelman, 1999; Bergerson, 2009; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010; Rose, 2012), and limited knowledge about postsecondary education and the process of preparing to attend college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Freeman, 2005; Perna, 2006; Person, Rosenbaum, & Deil-Amen, 2006; Tierney & Colyar, 2009). Despite the continued focus on four-year degree attainment, a growing interest in the value of “alternative credentials” has become a focus of policy makers, researchers, and individuals themselves, which researchers assert might alter future perceptions of educational attainment levels (Ewert & Kominski, 2014).

A Shifting Paradigm: The Emphasis on “Some” College

Horn and Li’s (2009) report on sub-baccalaureate credentialing highlights an emerging trend with regard to sub-baccalaureate credentialing, citing it as the largest growing segment of all postsecondary awards between the period of 1997 and 2007. It is not clear what prompted this movement, but it notably occurred amid a time of
heightened promotion of four-year degree attainment. The conferring of these credentials occurred in two primary school types: public community colleges and private for-profit institutions (Horn & Li, 2009). Public community colleges still confer most of these credentials; however, the for-profit sector has significantly grown in its share of conferring sub-baccalaureate credentials, which consists of career diplomas, occupational certificates, and associate’s degrees (Horn & Li, 2009).

Even following Horn and Li’s (2009) report, U.S. Department of Education NCES data on Career/Technical Education continues to show a considerable growth in sub-baccalaureate credential recipients (U.S. Dept. of Education, NCES CTE, 2010, Table P101, n.d.). Notable is that although public two-year institutions still award the greater share of sub-baccalaureate credentials, the for-profit sector of education also awards a substantial amount of certificates and degrees as illustrated in Table 1. For instance, in 2010, public 2-year institutions awarded a total of 937,998 sub-baccalaureate awards, consisting of 241,118 less-than-1-year certificates (aka, short-term certificates), 158,998 certificates requiring more than 1 year to complete (aka, moderate term certificates), and 537,882 associate’s degrees (see Table 1). Public less-than-two-year institutions awarded 36,815 sub-baccalaureate certificates, encompassing 17,642 short-term certificates and 19,173 moderate-term certificates.

In the for-profit sector, private 4-year schools awarded a total of 133,896 sub-baccalaureate awards in 2010, encompassing 11,814 short-term certificates, 15,330 moderate-term certificates, and 106,752 associate’s degrees (see Table 1). Private 2-year for-profit institutions awarded a total of 248,937 sub-baccalaureate credentials consisting
of 90,318 short-term certificates, 102,671 moderate-term certificates, and 55,948 associate’s degrees. Lastly, private for-profit less-than-2-year institutions awarded 207,901 sub-baccalaureate credentials. Of these, 102,429 were short-term certificates and 105,395 were certificates requiring a year or more to complete (see Table 1). In 2010, it is worth highlighting that for-profit institutions were responsible for conferring 40.6% of all short-term certificates, 51.6% of all moderate-term certificates, and 19.2% of all associate’s degrees, thus to making this “third sector” difficult to ignore (Horn & Li, 2009; Kinser, 2006, Tierney, 2013).

Table 1

2010 Sub-baccalaureate Credentials Awarded by Institutional Type & Credential Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Type</th>
<th>Short-term Certificates</th>
<th>Moderate-term Certificates</th>
<th>Associate’s Degree</th>
<th>Total Number of Sub-baccalaureate Awards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public 2-year Institutions</td>
<td>241,118</td>
<td>158,998</td>
<td>537,882</td>
<td>937,998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Less than 2-year</td>
<td>17,642</td>
<td>19,173</td>
<td></td>
<td>36,815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total for Public</td>
<td><strong>258,760</strong></td>
<td><strong>178,171</strong></td>
<td><strong>537,882</strong></td>
<td><strong>974,813</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private For-Profit 4-year</td>
<td>11,814</td>
<td>15,330</td>
<td>106,752</td>
<td>133,896</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private For-Profit 2-year</td>
<td>90,318</td>
<td>102,671</td>
<td>55,948</td>
<td>248,937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private For-Profit Less than 2-year</td>
<td>102,429</td>
<td>105,395</td>
<td></td>
<td>207,901</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions</td>
<td><strong>204,561</strong></td>
<td><strong>223,396</strong></td>
<td><strong>162,700</strong></td>
<td><strong>590,734</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Information from U.S. Department of Education, NCES/CTE Table P101, 2000-2010)

Between the period of 2000 and 2010 the growth of private for-profit institutions’ issuance of postsecondary credentials overall (i.e., occupational certificates, associate’s degrees, and bachelor’s degrees combined) occurred as follows: 13.6% in 2000, 13.5% in 2002, 15.5% in 2004, 16.4% in 2006, 16.9% in 2008, and 20.0% in 2010 (U.S.
Department of Education, NCES/CTE Table P103, n.d.). Highlights of this growth include the awarding of 19,918 bachelor’s degrees in 2000 and in 2010, conferring 97,788 bachelor’s degrees. Private for-profit less-than-2-year institutions had a slower growth rate, going from 153,798 sub-baccalaureate credentials issued in 2000 to 207,901 awards issued in 2010. However, the private for-profit two-year institutions grew from awarding 119,138 credentials in 2000 to awarding 248,937 sub-baccalaureate credentials in 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, NCES/CTE Table P101, n.d.).

President Obama’s 2009 call for Americans to acquire at least some postsecondary education is anticipated to fuel growth in the sub-baccalaureate credential area (Ewert & Kominski, 2014; Van Horn, 2015). Other education advocates, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation, are also urging Americans to obtain at least some postsecondary education (i.e., certificates, diplomas, and associate’s degrees), as this appears to coincide with work opportunities providing better earnings (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012; Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013; Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010; Perna, 2013; Rosenbaum et al., 2006). Hence, the general expansion of for-profit education as described above has once again renewed concerns about the worth and value of education from these institutions given their long and controversial history in the United States (Kinser, 2006b; Shinoda, 2013; Tierney, 2013).

The Growth in Sub-baccalaureate Education: Student Demographics

Amid concerns of increasing educational attainment, the question of who makes up the growing sector of sub-baccalaureate education is also important to know. In the first decade of the 21st century (the 1999-2000 to 2009-2010 period), African Americans
and Hispanic students each experienced a significant jump in the acquisition of associate’s degrees. Within the Hispanic/Latino community, their representation at this credential level grew from 9.3% (51,573) to 13.5% (112,211), representing a 118% increase. Black students’ representation grew by 89%, going from 10.9% (60,221) in 1999-2000 to 13.7% (113,905) of the distribution at this degree level in 2009-2010. Asian and Pacific Islander students had a much smaller increase in this category, taking their representation at this award level from 5.0% (27,782) to 5.3% (44,021). Similarly, Native American students experienced modest growth in their representation at the associate’s degree level, going from 6,497 (1.2%) in 1999-2000 to 10,337 (1.2%) in 2009-2010 (Aud et al., 2012, p. 285). White students continued to have higher acquisition rates of this credential, acquiring 73.7% (554,845) of associate’s degrees in 1999-2000 and 66.3% (833,337) of the share in 2009-2010.

Following this growth period of sub-baccalaureate education, U.S. Department of Education (See Appendix E, NCES/CTE 2011-2012, Table P-132, n.d.) data also continues to show a growing trend of sub-baccalaureate credential seekers. In regard to associate’s degrees, the distribution is as follows: 54.2% White, 17.7% Black, 19.0% Hispanic, 4.6% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4.5% other. Of those seeking a certificate, 51.5% are White, 21.6% are Black, 19.8% are Hispanic, 3.2% are Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4.0% are Other (See Appendix E, NCES/CTE 2011-2012, Table P132, n.d.). Overall, 52.4% of students enrolled in sub-baccalaureate programs were under age 25, along with adults age 25-34 representing 27.6 percent of this population, and adults age 35 years and older representing 20 percent of sub-baccalaureate program enrollees (see Appendix E,
Table NCES/CTE Table 130). Amid these percentages, adults age 35 and older were enrolled in certificate programs at a higher level than associate’s degree programs (25.2% vs. 19.1%). Adults age 25-35 were evenly represented in the certificate and associate’s degree programs (29.9 % vs. 27.2%). Students under age 25, however, were more apt to enroll in associate’s degree programs than certificate programs (53.8% vs. 45.1%) (See Appendix E, NCES/CTE, 2011-2012, Table P130). Also revealed in the 2011-2012 NCES/CTE report is that those from the lowest family SES category had a greater representation in certificate programs versus their counterparts in the third and highest income quartiles (32.9% vs. 22% and 18.3% respectively). There was also a higher percentage of students from the lowest income quartile in associate degree programs vs. students from the highest income quartile (27.6% vs. 20.8%) (See Appendix E, NCES/CTE, 2011-2012, Table P134).

Within the same dataset, the racial distribution of bachelor’s degree-seeking students is reported as 61.6% White, 14.3% Black, 13% Hispanic, 6.7% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4.4% Other (See Appendix E, NCES/CTE, Table P132). Thus in the case of Black and Hispanic students, they were more represented amongst associate’s degree programs than bachelor’s degree programs, which further highlights a persistent gap in their educational attainment in the traditional sense. The National Center for Education Statistics also reports that in 2011-2012, 70.7 percent of bachelor’s degree seekers were under the age of 25. Adults age 25-34 made up 17.4 percent of bachelor’s degree aspirants, and adults 35 and older represented 11.9 percent of bachelor degree aspirants.
Finally, data from the Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS) for the 2013-2014 academic year shows that 20.0% of all credentials conferred by 2-year private for-profit institutions went to Black students, representing 31,985 out of a total of 173,348 awards conferred by all 2-year institutions (i.e., public, private and for-profit). In regard to four-year institutions, 21.4% of all credentials awarded at 4-year private for-profit institutions were conferred to Black students, representing 76,090 out of a total of 339,260 awards conferred to Black students by all 4-year institutions (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2015). During the same period, Hispanic students were awarded 23.8% of all credentials awarded through 2-year private for-profit institutions, representing 37,992 students out of 173,348 Hispanic/Latino attending all 2-year institutions, and 12.1% of all credentials awarded at 4-year private for-profit institutions, representing 42,916 of 318,772 Hispanic/Latino students attending all 4-year institutions (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2015). Whites still received the greater share of postsecondary credentials awarded through for-profit schools: 42.9% at 4-year institutions and 36.2% of those awarded through 2-year institutions. As illustrated in the discussion above, low-income and racially under-represented students continue to be well represented in the highly controversial for-profit education sector (Cellini, 2005, 2012; Chung, 2009; Horn & Li, 2009; Tierney, 2013). And despite much emphasis on bachelor’s degree attainment, the needle has not moved as far as many people anticipated it would given the wealth of programming and policy established toward this end (Bergerson, 2009; Perna, 2013).
Problem Statement

Generally, discourses on postsecondary education position sub-baccalaureate certificates and diplomas earned at proprietary schools as hardly worth pursuing and less legitimate (Belistsky, 1970; Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010; Fulton, 1972; Grubb, 1993, 1994; Rosenbaum, 2011; Trivett, 1973; Trivett, 1975). Much of this is a result of deceptive practices that occurred in the 1950s with regard to the G.I. bill and later in the 1970s and 1980s, where a number of such schools were found to be fraudulently taking federal and state financial aid dollars in the absence of providing students with any real education and training (Kinser, 2006b; Zumani-Gallaher, 2004). Hence the term “diploma mill” became synonymous with the proprietary education industry, and to this day remains a black mark on the whole body of institutions despite their diversity and individual track records (Zumani-Gallaher, 2004). In fact, these same issues continue to plague the for-profit sector of post-secondary education, and have garnered renewed attention amongst policy makers, college access workers, and researchers alike as this sector continues to grow along with increased demands for Americans to have greater levels of education (Shinoda, 2013; Torpey, 2012).

From an ideological perspective, there is a great divide between the for-profit sector of education and “traditional” not-for-profit higher education (Clowes, 1995; Tierney, 2013; Trivett, 1975). Yet, the root of these tensions appears to go beyond more than just some schools behaving badly and unethically in their business practices—although this is a significant and real issue. Fundamentally, it represents the hierarchical positioning of one form of education (i.e., liberal arts based or classical education) over
another (namely trade or vocational training) that has persisted through much of our history.

James Anderson’s (1988) chronicling of the evolution of public education in the United States, following the abolition of slavery, provides an important backdrop to ongoing perceptions about vocational and occupational training that has been the hallmark of the original for-profit education industry. Through the lens of Critical Race Theory, entities such as education have become racialized forms of property (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995); hence the debate between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois about what forms of education to provide newly freed slaves seems reminiscent to current, yet shifting, perceptions of this sector of education by the way that it has been negatively discoursed and subsequently populated for many years.

Yet, despite the pervasive negative discoursing of for-profit postsecondary institutions, many people opt to attend a variety of privately owned sub-baccalaureate schools, even when they can get admitted to a public or private four-year or two-year college (Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Iloh & Tierney, 2014, Marecki, 1985; Revelle, 1997; Ross-Jones, 2006). Some people outright rebuffed the idea of attending college, which some interpret as an agentic move to protect their identity (Freeman, 1997; Freeman, 2005). In this study, I was curious about those who select to further their education, and in doing so, counter the ways urged in our larger culture. In essence, this dissertation research is about individuals’ responses to discourses on education regarding what they ought to do and how. Thus, in the chapters that follow, I document my exploration of the educational decision-making process of students attending a single non-degree granting,
less-than-2-year institution, which remains one of the least explored contexts of for-profit education (Kinser, 2006b).

Although there is a growing body of demographic information about students who pursue sub-baccalaureate programs at for-profit institutions, only a small body of research exists that examines students’ experiences in arriving at this destination (Chung, 2009; Horn & Li, 2009; Tierney, 2013). Further, in regard to college choice scholarship, very little attention has been given to for-profit education (Tierney, 2013). Additionally, much of the research that has been conducted in this area has been mainly quantitatively oriented, which although helpful in providing a macro understanding of students’ decision making, this approach is often limited in fully illuminating the circumstances behind the patterns observed. Most glaring, however, is that college choice scholarship fails to capture adults’ experiences with this process (Bergerson, 2009; Perna, 2006). Therefore, in this dissertation, I sought to fill an important gap in existing college choice research on multiple fronts in my exploration of the following research questions.

**Research Questions:**

1. As “college” choice has been described as a complex developmental process that takes shape over the course of one’s lifespan, what does this experience look like for adult students, who opt to attend a less-than-2-year, non-degree granting for-profit institution?
   
   a) What factors mediated students’ decisions to attend a for-profit institution rather than a non-profit institution offering similar educational programs?
b) What resources do students attending a for-profit institution draw upon in their “college” choice process?

2. In the Philadelphia region, how do adults experience the languaging of for-profit education?
   a) How do participants read their institutional type (Pyramid Career School) among other institutional types (e.g., community colleges, four-year institutions)?
   b) As a for-profit institution, how does Pyramid Career School portray itself to the world?
**Background and Context: The Philadelphia Metropolitan Area**

“Our system leaves future generations of Philadelphians woefully unprepared for the 21st-century global economy and ill-equipped to fully function in our communities.”

*Mayor Michael Nutter, 10-27-2015*

An important aspect of this research is the context in which I tried to explore the postsecondary education decision making of adults who elected to enroll in a less-than-2-year for-profit proprietary institution that awards diplomas in occupational areas such as medical billing and coding, medical assisting, and computer networking. Philadelphia is arguably a city on a mission to increase the educational attainment of its citizens. For decades, it has been a city in turmoil educationally in the K-12 sector, yet conversely, rich in the array of public and private institutions of higher education afforded to its proximity. There is virtually no shortage of post-secondary options for area residents to consider if they wanted to continue their education beyond high school. There are roughly 60 public and private not-for-profit postsecondary institutions in the Philadelphia metropolitan area (IPEDS Navigator tool2). Scattered among those institutions are 46 private proprietary institutions (IPEDS Navigator tool). However, few residents continue their education beyond secondary school—which itself tends to be a feat to complete.

When Mayor Michael Nutter entered office in 2008, he immediately asserted a commitment to improving educational attainment amongst city residents. One of his first initiatives was establishing the Mayor’s Office of Education, to which the guiding focus of the Office would be twofold: a) increasing the high school graduation rate to 80% by 2015 and b) doubling the percentage of residents with a 4-year college degree to 36% by

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2 Based on results of a 20 mile radius to 19103 zip code
2018 (Mayor’s Office of Education website, n.d.). According to a recent report completed by the Pew Charitable Trusts (2015a), Philadelphia residents continue to have “the lowest college attainment rate among the 15 biggest U.S. cities” (p. 3). The report further outlines that 18% of city residents have less than a high school diploma, 34% have earned a high school diploma or GED only, 18% have some college, 5% have an associate’s degree, and approximately 25% have a bachelor’s degree or higher (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2015a, p. 3).

Mayor Nutter’s challenge was steep, of course. The Notebook (2010), an independently published newspaper that focuses on education issues in the Philadelphia School District, reported that the average college-going rate of the class of 2009 high school graduates was approximately 34 percent. This number includes both two- and four-year institutions. Buried deep below the surface of this statistic is the volume of students who exited K-12 education before graduating. For decades, Philadelphia has had a significant problem with students exiting school prior to earning a diploma or GED (Nield & Balfanz, 2005). Therefore, the college participation rates of Philadelphians was in reality all the more lower than the 34 percent figure calculated at that time. Recent data from the Pew Charitable Trusts (2015a) research identifies that high school graduation rates, however, have been on the rise in the city, going from a low of 52% in 2005 to 65% in 2014. Although an improvement, it is far from Nutter’s 80% goal, and certainly far from the ideal goal of a 100% graduation rate.

There is really no other way to explain the educational disparity that exists in the city other than as chronic. After a contentious state takeover; the successive rotation of
several superintendents; a lot of school leadership turnovers; the issuance of teacher-proof curricula; the firing of teachers, guidance staff and other support personnel; a rapid move to charter schooling; and an ongoing and debilitating funding issue, education in Philadelphia has been an unfortunate mess. Yet, there is more to this situation as the city struggles with significant issues around poverty, violence, substance abuse. Eighty percent of students enrolled in the school district qualify for free-or-reduced lunch (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2015a). In 2013, 26.3% of Philadelphia residents lived in poverty, which is cited as one of the highest poverty rates amongst the 10 largest cities in the U.S. (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2015a, p. 67). Of this figure, 19% of the residents are White, 29% are Black, 36% are children, and 44% are Hispanic (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2015a). Related to this issue, of course, is a rather high unemployment rate in the city, which was 7.8% as of 2014—down from 10% in 2013. In terms of employers in the area, 30% of the jobs come from the education and medical sector, which represents 12 of the 15 largest employers in the city (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2015a).

Amid this milieu, however, there has been an aggressive college access movement in the city for about three decades. Marciene Mattleman, founder of Philadelphia Futures—a successful college access, scholarship and mentoring program, is a notable pioneer of this movement among so many others. George and Diane Weiss, of the Say Yes to Education program, who in 1987 guaranteed a free college education to 112 graduating 6th grade students of West Philadelphia’s Belmont Elementary School, are also notable for their efforts (Mezzacappa, 1999). The Philadelphia College Prep Roundtable, which originated in the 1990s as an informal grassroots network of higher
education professionals concerned about getting the city’s youth into college, remains an important contributor to the college access and success movement. As part of its “excellence in equity” agenda, the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) started the first of its college access programs in Philadelphia amongst its efforts to create a pipeline of under-represented students to the 14 publicly-funded universities. Even more notable is Pennsylvania State Representative Chaka Fattah’s creation of GEAR-UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs), which provides funding to expand college access programming on a mass scale across the United States. Other organizations and programs, such as White-Williams Scholars, the Philadelphia Youth Network, various university-sponsored Upward Bound Programs, and many other initiatives have been drivers of a college-going culture as well. Hence the research undertaken in this study emanated from my observations of an aggressive college access movement within the city, which I situate as part of the national “college-for-all” discourse (Carr, 2013; Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010; Goyette, 2008; Rosenbaum, 2001).

The notion of “college for all” is an important aspect of this research and is understood as a national movement occurring in the United States that pushes the educational attainment goal of all individuals to that of obtaining a bachelor’s degree (Carr, 2013; Domina, Conley, & Farkas, 2011; Rosenbaum, 2001). Thus I frame it as a powerful circulating discourse that “makes a particular action or interpretation appear as if it is the only reasonable action or choice to make” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 119). Scholars such as James Rosenbaum and his associates Regina Deil-Amen,
Stephanie DeLuca, and Ann Person, however, are representative of a small body of scholars who early on hailed a counter-perspective of this movement, citing that the greatest anticipated employer needs did not necessarily require a bachelor’s degree, which runs counter to the ideological positioning of bachelor’s degree as an end goal for all people (Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010; Rosenbaum, 2001; Rosenbaum & Deil-Amen, 2006). Despite competing ideologies about the necessity of a four-year degree, researchers, economists, and policy makers have come to the agreement that at least some postsecondary attainment is required as a result of significant changes in the workforce, namely the end of a manufacturing economy in the shadows of a rapidly growing information/knowledge economy that impacts local economies as well as the larger global marketplace (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013; Van Horn, 2013, 2015). In the Philadelphia region, however, 4-year college completion has remained a priority to the deafening exclusion of other potential options.

Amid the college for all discourse that I observed over time, there appeared to be silence about the many for-profit institutions in existence throughout the Philadelphia metropolitan area that seemed to be thriving. It appeared that instead of following the advocated pathway to “college,” individuals were electing a whole other option that went against this recommendation. Considering the negative reputation surrounding for-profit institutions, I was curious about students’ reason for enrolling in for-profit schools when perceivably they could enter one of a number of well-respected postsecondary institutions, including two public colleges in the region, a large community college system (as well as others in the surrounding counties), and two nearby state-related
institutions. As described earlier, the Philadelphia metropolitan area is home to 106 postsecondary institutions—most of which are accessible by public transportation.\(^3\) Ten of these schools are public institutions (e.g., Community College of Philadelphia, Penn State Abington, Temple University) and 50 schools are identified as private not-for-profits (e.g., Drexel University, University of Pennsylvania, St. Joseph’s University). The other 46, however, are a mix of private, for-profit institutions (e.g., The Art Institute of Philadelphia, Lincoln Technical Institute, The Restaurant School at Walnut Hill).

In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, over 400 postsecondary institutions exist. Forty-five are public four-year colleges and universities; 31 are public 2-year institutions; 31 are public less-than 2-year institutions (e.g., Intermediate occupational programs such as practical nursing and commercial driver’s license training); 5 are private less-than-2-year schools; 32 are private 2-year schools; 110 are private four-year colleges and universities; 16 are 4-year, private for-profit institutions; 86 are private for-profit 2-year institutions; and 67 are private for-profit less-than-2-year schools (NCES College Navigator tool, Nov. 1, 2015).

In regard to for-profit institutions, Pennsylvania classifies most for-profit institutions as “private licensed schools,” which are overseen by Pennsylvania’s State Board of Private Licensed Schools. State law specifically defines private licensed schools as follows:

A school or classes operated for profit or tuition that provides residents instruction to prepare an individual to pursue an occupation in the skilled trades, industry or

\(^3\) calculated by 20 mile radius of 19103 zip code on IPEDS College Navigator tool
business; or (that provides) systematic instruction by correspondence or by telecommunication in a field of study (PA Department of Education website, n.d.)

Under Act 174 of 1986, also known as the Private Licensed Schools Act, what constitutes a private licensed school is further defined by a number of exclusions. These exclusions are as follows:

[A] private academic school…, a school maintained or a class conducted for training for the vocation of homemaking or to give training in public and other service occupations; a barber school; a school of cosmetology; a flight school; a private tutorial school, including, but not limited to, a school of music or dance; an institution granting a degree other than those approved to award the degree of associate in specialized business or associate in specialized technology; a school or class conducted by an employer or trade union for employees or union members where no fee or tuition is charged; a school owned and operated by a bona fide religious institution whose only purpose is the providing of religious instruction; a school conducted by the Commonwealth or a political subdivision thereof; or a school which is operated by a licensed hospital…and which is accredited by a regional or national accreditation agency.

(PA Department of Education website, n.d.)

Pennsylvania further categorizes private licensed schools according to “resident schools” and “distance education schools.” Resident schools are those in which “instruction delivered at a school’s site as opposed to being delivered by correspondence, distance education or telecommunication to students located at sites which are geographically removed from the school” (PA Department of Education, 2014). Resident schools consist of two further categories: “PA-Licensed Resident Schools” and “Out-of-State Registered Resident Schools.” A “registered school” is defined as follows:
An out-of-state entity that meets the definition of a private licensed school and that has been authorized by the Board [of Private Licensed Schools] to recruit Pennsylvania citizens into the entity’s educational programs. Except in the case of registered distance education schools, the programs are delivered at the entity’s out-of-state location and Pennsylvania’s pursue their studies at that location.

(PA Department of Education website, n.d.)

It should be noted that postsecondary institutions are not the only schools represented under this grouping of institutions. Per the 2012-2013 annual report, of the 180,668 students enrolled through private licensed schools, 114,263 students enrolled in distance education schools, of which 61,540 were involved in distance education high school programs, and the other 52,723 were enrolled in distance education career training. During the same period, 270 students enrolled in “out-of-state” programs and 66,405 were enrolled in resident schools. In essence, the way in which the Commonwealth organizes institutions under this labeling system is a bit confusing, as cosmetology schools, which are often for-profit institutions, would not be included under the Board’s purview per state law. Therefore, readers should note that discrepancies in what IPEDS data identify as proprietary institutions in Pennsylvania will vary from the Pennsylvania Department of Education’s count because of the way in which the Commonwealth defines and excludes certain education in its description of private licensed schools.

Currently, a combined 253 institutions are authorized by the Board of Private Licensed Schools to provide education in the Commonwealth (Pennsylvania Department of Education website). In the state’s online database, Philadelphia County has 37 private licensed schools. In the surrounding counties that partly make up the Delaware Valley
region of Philadelphia\textsuperscript{4}, the following count of private licensed schools exist: 15 in Montgomery County, 9 in Delaware County, and 8 in Bucks County. These schools offer an array of vocational programs in areas such as truck driving/commercial driver’s license training, auto mechanic training, medical massage therapy instruction, and business education.

**Rationale and Significance of this Study**

In the research that will be described in this thesis, I sought to understand the postsecondary choice behaviors of adults in the Philadelphia metropolitan region. As a college access worker and former resident of Philadelphia, I have had a longtime interest in the educational trajectory of youth in the city, which has expanded to the lives of adults over the years.

Considering the heavy promotion of “college-for-all” throughout the Philadelphia metropolitan area, and the underwhelming statistics around college participation, I was curious about the for-profit sector that appeared to have a vibrant existence throughout the region. Often I have seen students leaving en masse from places such as Lincoln Technical Institute or the former Thompson Institute. Yet, I knew of no research conducted in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania regarding the topic of for-profit education and students’ experiences with this universe of schools. Due to the urban characteristics of the two major cities flanked on both ends of the Commonwealth of

\textsuperscript{4} The Delaware Valley is commonly referred to as Philadelphia, PA, and the immediate surrounding regions (i.e., the neighboring Pennsylvania counties of Bucks County, Chester County, and Delaware County; Southern New Jersey (e.g., Camden County, Burlington County, Atlantic County); and the state of Delaware.
Pennsylvania—Philadelphia and Pittsburgh—the state makes for an attractive haven for proprietary postsecondary education institutions, considering their longstanding history of attracting low-income and/or people of color in urban enclaves (Apling, 1993; Chung, 2009; Grubb, 1993; Kinser, 2006b; Shinoda, 2013; Zamani-Gallaher, 2004). Thus, it seemed worthwhile to begin exploring the way in which students in the Philadelphia metropolitan region respond to for-profit institutions as a viable learning context.

In general, there is a tendency in the traditional higher education community to simply ignore for-profit institutions as if that will make them go away or become less important. The shunning is real from those who align themselves with traditional higher education, but that does not stop students from enrolling at such institutions. This is what led me to wonder about the way in which students hear and interpret the “college for all” discourse and subsequently respond to it in an alternative manner. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis’s (2005) discussion of critical discourse analysis underscores that people are not “passive consumers or social dupes” (p. 120). Thus the way in which “texts are heard, read, and talked about by people partially determine their productive power and thus must be studied systematically” (p. 120).

Through the media, most of us hear about the bad experiences students have had with for-profit education, but as Kinser (2006b), Rosenbaum et al. (2006), Tierney (2013), Chung (2009) and others have highlighted, the landscape of for-profit education is quite diverse, and we really do not have a complete understanding of the for-profit education universe. Hence through this study, I hope to add to the growing body of research on for-profit education that might inform the college access community, policy
makers and other interested stakeholders in how and why students embark on this destination and how we might go about supporting adults interested in furthering their education in a way that honors their individual needs and desires—which is what “choice” is supposed to infer.

Given the backdrop provided above, the significance of this research is manifold. First, we know little about adults’ processes with “college” choice (Kelly, 2015; Perna, 2006; Tumblin, 2002). Second, there are few empirical studies examining college choice in relation to for-profit institutions, which have become a sizeable entity in the postsecondary landscape (Allen, 2014; Cellini, 2012; Kinser, 2006b; Tierney, 2013). Although there is speculation about how and why students enroll at for-profit institutions despite the negative reputation surrounding this body of institutions, very limited research has been conducted to explore students’ actual decision-making processes. And for those studies that exist, they primarily examine students in 2-year occupational colleges and/or for-profit institutions, which is the focus of this research.

According to Kinser (2006b), the non-degree granting segment of for-profit postsecondary education is the most common but least explored body of institutions. The U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (2010) reveals that this was the most common type of for-profit institution in the nation, with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania having the 8th largest share of this school type (n=59). At the 2-year, private for-profit institution level, Pennsylvania ranked 3rd with 83 institutions. In regard to 4-year private, for-profit institutions, Pennsylvania only had 11.
As I looked up schools in Pennsylvania more recently, using the NCES College Navigator Tool (November 3, 2015), the total of less-than-2-year private for-profit school is now 67, and the total of private for-profit 4-year institutions is 16. The total number of 2-year private for-profit institutions is 86. Therefore, these institutions continue to thrive and grow in Pennsylvania.

Finally, using a critical literacy and language studies framework as a lens, I sought to explore how students who choose to study at for-profit institutions arrive at their decisions given the negative discourse surrounding such schools and training as being diametrically inferior to the preferred bachelor’s degree acquired at traditional non-profit institutions of higher education. In doing so, I integrated three areas of scholarship that have not been brought together before: college choice, proprietary education, and literacy/language scholarship.

College choice scholarship has a well-established history that seemingly emanated from the implementation of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA). Once the doors of postsecondary education were opened for all, the tracking of who went where and why became of interest to policy makers and scholars alike—especially when HEA policies appeared to fall short in meeting established goals as described earlier. However, even before that trend began, the issue of enrollment management was the initial focus of college choice scholarship, as there were institutional concerns about impending declines in student enrollment in the 1970s (Bergerson, 2009; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Paulsen, 1990). My dissertation research on “college choice” presents a detailed empirical look at adults’ pathways to a single sub-baccalaureate, for-profit educational
institution. To date, much of the research conducted on college choice is through quantitative analysis, with a limited number of studies employing qualitative methods either fully or partially to supplement quantitative data (Freeman, 1997; Perna, 2006a). Thus, there is a call within the literature (e.g. Perna, 2006a; Freeman, 1997 & 2005; Goldrick-Rab, Carter & Wagner, 2007; Kinser, 2006b; Oseguera & Malagon, 2011; Tierney, 2013) for further research on for-profit education generally, and specifically for more qualitative studies to provide fuller picture of students’ college choice experiences.

The Problem of For-Profit/Proprietary Education

Considering the recent boom of proprietary institutions of higher education at the turn of the 21st century, one might overlook the fact that they have been a fixture of the American postsecondary landscape for a very long time. Proprietary education has existed in the United States since the 17th century and has been responsible for providing career training in a multitude of areas such as cosmetology, secretarial studies, and auto repair (Apling, 1993; Kinser, 2006a, 2006b). In 2006, Kinser reported that more than 100 existing proprietary schools could trace their origin back a century or more.

Traditional vs. Contemporary Proprietary Institutions

In the literature on for-profit education, the field breaks into two categories: the first chronicles the enormous growth of a newer sector of the for-profit education market that confers bachelor’s degrees and graduate education (Chung, 2009; Kinser, 2006a, 2006b). Represented in this category are postsecondary institutions such as DeVry University, the University of Phoenix, and Strayer University. The second category
consists of the more traditional model of for-profit occupational education as represented by small business schools (e.g., Katherin Gibbs, McCann Business School), beauty schools, culinary arts schools, and a host of other trade-focused schools that teach auto mechanics, HVAC, drafting, etc. (e.g., Lincoln Technical Institute, ITT, Kaplan Career Institute).

In Deborah Brandt’s (2001) book on the evolution of literacy standards in the United States, she highlights the story of a woman, Genna May, who attended one such institution, which provides a glimpse of how for-profit institutions once fruitfully served people.

Graduating in 1917 in a class of 13, she [Genna] enrolled immediately in a proprietary business college in the state capital 20 miles away. The school, founded in the mid-1850s originally as a preparatory school for the state university, had been bought in the early twentieth century by area bankers and other private investors. The school underwent a new direction and major expansion beginning in 1914 to provide the area with a business-oriented workforce, including, especially, female clerical workers. This training helped to sustain manufacturing and commercial enterprises that were proliferating…Part school, part employment agency, the college found Genna her first job after only a few months of instruction…“At that time, they sent you out when they thought you were able to get a job,” she explained. “They always found jobs for you.” (Brandt, 2001, p. 79)

Modern day proprietary schools, such as DeVry University, began emerging after WWII, coinciding with the introduction of the GI Bill (Apling, 1993; Kinser, 2006b, Morey, 2004; Ruch, 2001). And although the availability of federal student aid has influenced the growth of proprietary institutions substantially, they continue to fight for access to the full range of public funding available to traditional institutions of higher
education (Belitsky, 1970; Borrego, 2002; Burd, 2003; Kinser, 2006b, Kirp, 2004; and Morey). Various authors (e.g., Kinser, 2006b; Shinoda, 2013; Tierney, 2013) also underscore the advancement of technology, coupled with the needs of today’s adult learners and the rising cost of post-secondary education, as fueling the growth of this industry. In about two decades, proprietary education has seemingly evolved from a marginal, fringe-existence in the postsecondary education community into a competitive, sophisticated and profitable entity, with much of the growth emanating from for-profit’s new focus on conferring bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees (Fain & Lederman, 2015; Kinser, 2006b; Morey, 2004, Shinoda, 2013). However, amid the latest government crackdown on the for-profit education sector, there have been some decline in enrollments recently reported (Bidwell, 2013; Fain, 2014; Kieler, 2015; Shinoda, 2013).

Unlike industry giants such as the University of Phoenix, who boast enrollments of hundreds of thousands of students, proprietary institutions have traditionally been defined as small, private, short-term career training schools for high school graduates seeking quick employment (Apling, 1993; Belitsky, 1970; Chung, 2008; Shinoda, 2013; Trivett, 1975). In Belitsky’s study, he estimated approximately 300 students at the average school. Chung (2009) describes most for-profits as neighborhood enterprises or venture institutes that are fewer than 100 students in size (p. 8). Apling (1993) reported a median of 64 as the average enrollment in the for-profit sector, with only 25% of all proprietary schools enrolling more than 175 students (p. 383). Additionally, conventional for-profit schools are typically open-access institutions that
require a minimal level of formal education (Kinser, 2006b). At one point, some made use of the federal government statute of Ability to Benefit, which permitted institutions to accept students who had not yet earned a high school diploma or GED (Belitsky, 1970). This policy, however, was eliminated in 2012.

Many traditional and contemporary for-profits institutions usually focus on educating without the complimentary student service offerings one is likely to find at a traditional, public or private, non-profit college or university (Morey, 2004; Howard-Vital, 2006). Further, they are widely criticized for devaluing higher education’s role of instilling important civic awareness beliefs by overemphasizing career-training rather than an appreciation of a liberal arts curriculum (Bailey et al., 2001; Farrell, 2003; Persell & Wenglinsky, 2004; Tierney, 2013). Typically, for-profit institutions focus on employment trends and create programs to meet the immediate needs of business and industry (Apling, 1993; Belitsky, 1970; Chung, 2009; Kinser, 2006b; Persell & Wenglinsky, 2004; Tierney, 2013; Trivett, 1973, Trivett, 1975). Upon completion of training, usually ranging from several months to two years, students in sub-baccalaureate contexts are conferred a certificate, diploma, or associate’s degree to qualify their knowledge (Apling, 1993; Kinser, 2006b; Morey, 2004; Sykes, 2012). Most consider it essential to their survival to offer assistance with job placement following the completion of the students’ training (Kirp, 2004; Morey, 2004; Belitsky, 1970; Trivett, 1973). Hence many have worked hard at cultivating relationships with employers (Borrego, 2002). In fact, this is a trademark of for-profit schools, which has traditionally been deemed as
equally important as the admissions/recruitment phase, as highlighted in Brandt’s (2001) depiction of Genna May.

**Cost of Attendance**

One of the many critiques of for-profit education is the issue of cost. In regard to price, Brimah (2000) and Morey (2004) cite that for-profit institutions typically cost more than public state colleges and community colleges, yet they are relatively on par or just below the cost of tuition and fees at traditional private institutions (Cellini, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, NCES, IPEDS, Fall 2014, Institutional Characteristics component (preliminary data); Tierney, 2013). Deil-Amen and DeLuca (2010) cite that students attending for-profit institutions may pay upwards of five times the cost of studying a similar program at a public community college. However, various scholars (Bailey, Badway, & Gumport, 2001; Cellini, 2012; Shinoda, 2013; Zamani-Gallaher, 2004) also point out that, in essence, the cost to educate a student between these institution types is actually very similar as the difference in sticker price is largely a matter public non-profit schools receiving public funding to subsidize students’ actual cost of attendance. Notably, though, proprietary institutions have acquired considerable sums of federal student aid dollars, which has been an ongoing concern by many who oppose their participation in federal student aid programs because of high student loan default rates and corresponding poor employment rates following students’ completion of programs (Apling, 1993; Bailey et al., 2001; Grubb, 1993; Kinser, 2006b; Shinoda, 2013; Tierney, 2013).
Accreditation

Accreditation is voluntary; however, many for-profits schools seek some form of accreditation to enhance their credibility and to qualify to participate in Title IV student aid programs through the federal Department of Education (Kinser, 2006; Tierney, 2013; Trivett, 1975. Belitsky notes that generally, however, business, trade and technical schools are evaluated by national associations rather than well-known and highly esteemed regional accrediting agencies such as the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. Kinser’s (2003) investigation of accredited proprietary schools identified 65 institutions as possessing regional accreditation—notably from the North Central Association of Higher Learning Commission—which was a forerunner in granting accreditation to “alternative” educational programs. Two of the most popular accrediting bodies of for-profit post-secondary institutions is the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS) and the Accrediting Commission on Career Schools and Colleges of Technology (ACCSCT).

Student Demographic Profile of For-Profit Postsecondary Education

Only since the mid-1990s has the U.S. Department of Education began to include data on for-profit institutions in its IPEDS database, which now provides a better accounting of their representation in the postsecondary market (Chung, 2009; 2006b). Within the entire post-secondary education population, student enrollment in for-profit schools is still modest, although sizeable. According to the Department of Education (2015) NCES information, for-profit institutions educate a little over 11% of all
undergraduate students. Yet many in the higher education community have expressed concern regarding the aggressive expansion of the new for-profit industry and how this may affect enrollment at traditional private and public non-profit institutions—particularly state schools, junior and community colleges (Bailey, Badway, & Gumport, 2001; Kinser, 2006b).

One of the most widely cited characteristics of the contemporary, degree-granting, for-profit higher education sector is its strong appeal to minorities and adult learners despite options to attend less expensive public colleges and universities (Chung, 2009; Farrell, 2003; Iloh & Tierney, 2014; Kinser, 2006b; Howard-Vital, 2006; Shinoda, 2013; Zamani-Gallaher, 2004). Many of these students say they choose to attend for-profits because of their convenience, concentration on a career preparation, and student friendliness (Howard-Vital, 2006; Revelle, 1997; Ross-Jones, 2006). Further, the education provided is directed towards learning a skill that will lead to a job, as opposed to just becoming more educated in a general sense (Apling, 1993; Bailey et al., 2001; Belitsky, 1970; Chung, 2009; Kinser, 2006b; Oseguera & Malagon, 2011; Revelle, 1997; Ross-Jones, 2006; Trivett, 1975).

In Chung’s (2009) quantitative analysis of data from three National Postsecondary Student Aid Studies (i.e., NPSAS 1996, NPSAS: 2000, NPSAS: 2004), she found that “for-profit students are systematically and significantly different from their counterparts in non-profit 2-year and 4-year schools” (p. 15). The specific differences Chung (2009) noted between for-profit and non-profit institution attendees include the following: For-profit students “are more likely to be female and more likely to be non-White” (p. 12).
For-profit students “are less likely to be single, but more likely to have a dependent and be single parents” (p. 12). For-profit students are more likely to have a GED rather than a high school diploma. Similarly, the parents of for-profit attendees were noted as having lower levels of education than non-profit institution attendees’ parents. Specifically, parents of for-profit students were more likely to be GED recipients or identify a high school diploma as their highest educational credential (Chung, 2009, p. 12). Additionally, Chung notes that proprietary education students reported having lower incomes and working less while attending school. Thus, for-profit students were also more apt to attend school on a full-time basis (p. 12). Lastly, a greater percentage of for-profit education students identified their final post-secondary education credential goal was that of earning a certificate, which was in contrast to students attending non-profit institutions, who cited intentions of earning an associate degree or a higher credential (Chung, 2009, p. 12).

Chung (2009) further cites that for-profit students enrolled in 4-year baccalaureate programs are notably different from those enrolled in 2-year or less-than-2-year for-profits programs of study. Likewise, Oseguera and Malagon’s (2010) study underscores that two-year and four-year for-profit students are quite different (as does Cellini, 2005; Kinser, 2006b, and Tierney & Hentschke, 2007). In particular, students at 4-year for-profit schools “are more likely to be older, male, white, and married” than for-profit students enrolled in 2-year or less-than-2-year institutions (Chung, 2009, p. 13). Additionally, 4-year for-profit school attendees are “more likely to have children and less likely to be single parents” (p. 13). Further, students attending 4-year for-profit
institutions were noted as having higher incomes than students attending non-profit 4-year institutions (Chung, 2009, p. 13). Additionally, the parents’ level of education amongst 4-year for-profit students was found to be comparable to those students attending non-profit 2-year schools, yet for-profit parents had a greater representation of bachelor’s or master’s degree holders (Chung, 2009, p. 13). Chung’s (2009) research also revealed that students at 4-year for-profits usually attend schools that are “larger in size” and at “a greater distance” from their homes than the rest of the for-profit student population (Chung, 2009, p. 13-14). Overall, the student bodies of for-profit institutions are extremely heterogeneous (Chung, 2009; Kinser, 2006b; Tierney & Hentschke, 2007).

Although they are more similar to each other than the 4-year for-profit population, 2-year and less-than-2-year students also differ in some ways. At the 2-year and below level, their students tend to be disproportionately female, poor, minority, and academically low-skilled (Apling, 1993; Burd, 2003; Chung, 2009; Howard-Vital, 2006; Kinser, 2006; Persell & Wenglinsky, 2004). Less-than-two-year students reported having slightly higher incomes than 2-year students, and enrolled full-time more often in short-term programs that lead to a certificate (Chung, 2009, p. 14). They are also less likely to hold a GED, and are more likely to have college-educated parents (Chung, 2009, p. 14). Finally, African Americans are highly represented in the less-than-2 year and 4-year for-profit institutions rather than two-year institutions (Chung, 2009; p. 13; Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2015).

Finally, although for-profit education has existed for centuries in the United States, empirical research conducted on this sector has been scant mainly due to issues of
access, and secondly, because of the traditional higher education community’s shunning of them (Kinser, 2006b; Cellini, 2005; Iloh & Tierney, 2014; Tierney, 2013; Trivett, 1975). Thus, there remains a host of issues and areas to be explored in this sector of education as the United States attempts to move forward with a tempered version of “postsecondary education for all.” In 1972, the amendment of the Higher Education Act of 1965 brought a spotlight to proprietary institutions as they fought for eligibility to participate in federal financial aid programs offered through Title IV legislation (Kinser, 2006; Trivett, 1973, 1975). As a result, a number of foundational studies on proprietary education were completed by researchers such as Apling (1993); Grubb (1993; 1994); Lyke, Gabe, & Aleman, (1991); Phipps, Harrison, & Merisotis, (2000); and Wilms (1975) to gain a better understanding of this sector’s program offerings, student population, and purported issues of fraudulent practices, which centered around the high loan default rates of students and the failure of students to realize any financial gains from their education and training (Kinser, 2006b; Tierney, 2013). These studies provide an important glimpse of this area of postsecondary education; however, additional research is needed to understand the for-profit sector in the present context. Especially desirable are studies employing a mixed methods or qualitative approach, which have the capacity to provide a finer grain understanding of these institutional settings and the students who opt to attend them than quantitative research can achieve alone (Kinser, 2006b; Tierney, 2013).
CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK & LITERATURE REVIEW

The conceptual framework for this study was largely informed by two prominent models of college choice that have been instrumental in framing this phenomenon as we know it thus far: Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-phase model and Perna’s (2006) multi-layered model. Second, critical and poststructural philosophical influences on the study of literacy and language, namely the work of Jean François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Paulo Freire, and New Literacy Studies scholar, James Gee, provided a theoretical framing for how individuals make sense of and respond to social discourses about education. These scholars have introduced provocative interpretations of the ways in which ideology is embedded in literacy and language practices, and how that consequently affects the way individuals identify themselves and experience various social contexts. In addition to the critical lens that these theorists have brought to our understanding of literacy and language practices as a means of facilitating inequitable power structures, Paulo Freire (1970) also redefined what constitutes reading as a way of knowing and understanding the world that expands and problematizes common notions of literacy. Rounding out my approach to studying the college choice experience of adult for-profit education students, I used narrative as a way of representing experience as it offers a methodological approach that bridges the literacy and language concepts and college choice scholarship used in this research.
Postmodern and Post-structural Influences and Critical Literacy

It is important to underscore that literacy, language and education have always served as gatekeeping devices throughout much of history, and certainly in the United States (Anderson, 1988; Morrell, 2008). Hence it makes sense that any and all sites where literacy, language and education are practiced or taught, becomes a site of social and political struggle. The context of for-profit post-secondary education, the focus of this study, is arguably one such context.

As I have pondered about the sense making of people’s choices to attend for-profit schools, critical literacy theory has provided powerful analytical tools to name, frame, and excavate elements that constitute the phenomenon of students’ selection of a proprietary institution. The first of these is Paulo Freire’s notion of critical literacy, which incorporates the act of reading as being more than simply reading letters and words off of a page (Fecho & Meacham, 2009; Morrell, 2008). In his highly popularized, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire (1970) establishes that before we learn to read the word, people first become experts at reading the world around them. And over a period of interrogating these readings, individuals become critically conscious of the parameters of their world and are thus enabled to respond transformatively to their conditions. An especially salient point of Freire’s praxis is his attention to the lived experiences of everyday people (Morrell, 2008, p. 54), which I, too, made prominent in this study.

As a parallel to how I understand and value the multiple ways in which people practice literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2008; Heath, 1983; Nabi, Rogers, & Street, 2009), I approached this study with a similar anti-deficit mindset. Rather than
viewing students’ choices as simply poor and uninformed, I took the stance that upon a closer look, participants’ sense-making of their options might reveal important rationales and perspectives that differently socially-situated individuals might overlook. Kassie Freeman’s (2005) qualitative study of African American high school students’ college choice experiences demonstrates that some students are indeed reading the experiences of people who are similar to them as a cautionary tale for not investing in college attendance (p. 43), as does Kabeera Weissman’s (2012) dissertation research of Philadelphia high school students (p. 212-213). Therefore, interpretations made by econometric researchers seem to hold true in that students’ decision-making is influenced by expected gains and rewards for the work and effort needed to earn a college credential.

Using the work of Foucault, I frame the “college-for-all” movement (see Carr, 2013; Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010; Rosenbaum, 2011), in which the attainment of a bachelor’s degree is the goal, as a dominant class discourse. By framing the social push for college education as a discourse, I sought to explore the various ways in which people read and respond to this message, hence allowing a space for understanding the sense-making of individuals who select educational paths other than the esteemed bachelor’s degree.

An important aspect of Foucault’s work is what is referred to as genealogies of knowledge in which he examines how meanings of things or subjects become constructed within particular historical moments, and are subsequently used in shaping or legitimating particular viewpoints (Morrell, 2008, p. 51). Bain (1995) sums it up well in saying that “Discourse is not the unmediated representation of a preexistent world.
Discourses operate via restrictive systems of exclusion and inclusion that establish the parameters of discourse…Discourse does not re-present the world. It orders it” (p. 6). Embedded in this statement is the fact that discourses are socially constructed by people, who typically have a vested interest in the way “reality” is framed. In concert with Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, discourses can be described as “a systematic set of relations” within which statements, practices, and corresponding institutions are given meaning and their self-evident reality (Bain, 1995, p. 6).

Foucault’s theory is also useful in examining the social positioning of for-profit institutions amid the “traditional” world of higher education, which remains exclusionary to “non-traditional” forms of education (Burd, 2003; Clowes, 1995; Kinser, 2006b; Trivett, 1975). Across various bodies of literature, there are well-documented tensions between the for-profit and non-profit worlds of education—from disputes about nomenclature (i.e., what constitutes higher education vs. postsecondary education), to objections for accreditation, and blocking for-profit institutions’ participation in financial aid programs (Burd, 2003; Kinser, 2006a, 2000b; Trivett, 1975). For the most part, for-profit schools existed quietly and somewhat hidden in the postsecondary community due to their shunning by advocates of traditional not-for-profit postsecondary education (Burd, 2003; Clowes, 1995; Kinser, 2006b; Trivett, 1975). The notion of silence is as much important as to what is spoken in Foucault’s theorizing about discourses. Lastly, Foucault’s theory also provides something of a light at the end of the tunnel in that people can respond agentically to discourses that constrain them through acts of resistance. A
student opting to fulfill the mission of furthering his or her education via a sub-baccalaureate credential at a for-profit school, might count as such an act.

Next, Lyotard’s (1984) conceptualization of grand narratives and meta-narratives serve as an important backdrop to this study. Meta-narratives are considered “macro-theories that attempt to explain social reality in its entirety” (Leistyina, Woodrun, & Sherblom, 1996, p. 337). Yet these explanations are criticized for being overly simplistic in that they fail to capture a diversity of experiences and realities that coexist in the world. Thus, instead, Lyotard (1984) asserts that micro-narratives are a more accurate representation of many different realities. In Bergerson’s (2009) monograph on college choice scholarship, she highlights the shifting paradigm in scholars’ thinking about the construction of comprehensive models of college choice as being able to account for the diversity of individuals who embark on this process (p. 114). Therefore, the goal of this research was to gather intimate portraits of adults’ trajectories to for-profit education as a means of contextualizing the dynamics of their unique postsecondary choice experiences.

**College Choice**

Bergerson (2009) describes college choice as “the process through which students decide whether and where to go to college” (p. 2). This experience is considered to be a complex developmental process that takes place over the course of many years of a person’s life, beginning as early as childhood (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The process itself involves an interplay of variables such as students’ cultural backgrounds, academic preparation, and life aspirations in the development of a disposition towards
postsecondary education that evolves into the selection of a specific institution (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 207).

Since the 1980s, college choice has been studied from sociological and economics of education frameworks (Freeman, 1997, 2005; Louie, 2007; Perna, 2006). The econometrics model, based on human capital theory, examines individuals’ decisions to enroll in college based on “a comparison between the present value of perceived lifetime benefits and the present value of perceived lifetime costs” (Perna, 2006, p. 118). In essence, individuals opt to participate in college based on their perceived array of life path options and what each option may yield in benefits of return. According to econometric perspectives on college choice, individuals are believed to pursue their options rationally, and hence selecting the option that provides the largest net benefit according to their respective tastes and preferences (Perna, 2006). Scholars further underscore that “human capital models do not assume that individuals have perfect and complete information” as they make their decisions about educational options; hence, they “evaluate college options based on available information about the benefits and costs” (Perna, 2006, p. 108).

Sociological models of college choice succeeded econometric models, as a result of scholars recognizing that the college choice process was far more complex than simply evaluating the rewards for effort and resources expended in attaining additional education (Bergerson, 2009; Perna, 2006). In about the last 20 years, researchers have been studying college choice using Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of social reproduction, which emphasizes that particular levels of educational attainment, as well as the type
postsecondary institution attended, is linked to students’ socioeconomic status, and is therefore socially and culturally influenced (Bergerson, 2009; Perna, 2006). Central constructs of this model include habitus (i.e., “the system of values and beliefs that shapes an individual’s views and interpretations” (Perna, 2006, p. 115)) and indexes of cultural capital, e.g., “language skills,” “mannerisms,” and dominant society “cultural knowledge” (Perna, 2006, p. 111) and social capital, e.g., “social networks that enable people to gain access to human, cultural and other forms of capital” (Perna, 2006, p. 112). The use of this lens has produced a great deal of policy-shaping research, and subsequently funding and programming, to support minorities and low-income individuals (often framed as first-generation college goers) in gaining access to higher education with the intention of producing more bachelor’s degree recipients. Programs such as Upward Bound and GEAR-UP, among many other community-based programs, serve to provide the missing cultural and social knowledge deemed necessary to foster youngsters’ dispositions towards college attendance (Bergerson, 2009).

Amid the perspectives on college choice, Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model has served as the bedrock to a plethora of evolving models, theories, and research pertaining to college choice and college access (Bergerson, 2009, Perna, 2006). Yet, it has only been used to map the experiences of traditional age students, with an emphasis on baccalaureate degree programs. The Hossler and Gallagher model represents a synthesis of earlier college choice research organized in a three phases sequence titled *predisposition, search, and choice*. The predisposition phase is categorized as students’ developing awareness of college and their academic and social preparation en route to
possible enrollment after high school. Much research has been produced on this particular phase of the model, which has led to programming to influence the participation of under-represented minorities (e.g., Upward Bound, GEAR-UP). Grades 7 through 10 are associated with this phase.

The search phase, which is believed to occur between 10th-12th grade, entails students’ process of identifying institutions that might provide the training and education needed for their future goals. Additionally, students begin to investigate schools that meet other personal criteria regarding fit, reputation, location, cost, and so forth (Bergerson, 2009; Freeman, 2005; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Nora, 2004; Perna, 2006). Within this phase students gather information about their options from an array of places (e.g., institutions, websites, libraries) and individuals (e.g., family, friends, school teachers and guidance counselors).

The choice phase is the final step in this model where students narrow their options to one institution to which they plan to enroll. Typically this includes comparing the amount of financial aid one can get amongst a short list of schools, or evaluating differences between program quality, travel distance, and so forth. This stage is estimated to occur between grades 11 and 12 for traditional-age college goers (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000).

In citing Manski’s (1993) work, Perna (2006) re-emphasizes important limitations of both sociological and rational human capital investment models of college choice:

Although sociological models help us understand the ways in which students acquire information about educational options, they have yet to inform us how
people use this information in their decision-making. Economic approaches provide a framework for understanding decision making, but are limited by their failure to examine the nature of information that is available to decision makers. (Perna, 2006, p. 114)

From this observation, Perna (2006, 2013) proposed of a new four-layer model of college choice that merges the econometric and sociological perspectives to promote a more comprehensive accounting of the factors influencing students’ college choice experiences. Although the human capital investment perspective remains at the core of a student’s college choice process, the model depicts it as embedded within and shaped by various social constructs. Hence Perna’s model reflects a “situated context” (p. 116), and attempts to acknowledge multiple potential paths that students might take (p. 146).

The first layer of Perna’s model pertains to a student’s habitus, which in this study I associate to students’ conscious and unconscious readings of the world. Further, it corresponds to contemporary literacy scholars’ focus on the socio-cultural nature of literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). The second layer captures the school and community context, which emphasizes that an individual’s behavior can only be understood in within the social context in which it occurs (Perna, 2006, p. 141). Various literacy and language scholars have similarly demonstrated in numerous ways how social, cultural, environmental, and organizational settings shape (Brandt, 2001; Rose, 2005), define (Brandt, 2001; Gee, 2008; Nabi, Rogers, & Street, 2009, Rose, 2005), restrict (Campano, 2007; Rymes, 2003) or foster (Brandt, 2001; Campano, 2007; Campano &
Damico, 2007; Rose, 2005) student’s literacy performances as well as intersect with their identity.

The third layer focuses on the higher education context, such as the effects of institutional marketing practices, location, characteristics, and competition (Perna, p. 142). I sought to explore the institutional discourse used in attracting students to proprietary schools, as well as students’ own interpretations of the larger discourse regarding the significance of postsecondary education to their lives. The final and fourth layer of Perna’s model examines the social, economic, and policy context, whereas students’ choices may be mediated by the labor market, policies that promote or deter college enrollment (e.g., federal student aid, affirmative action), and demographic characteristics of the population (Perna, p. 143). Again, I was interested in exploring the critical readings of the world student might be engaging in when they select a proprietary institution over more privilege forms of postsecondary education (traditional not-for-profit 4-year colleges and universities).

In sum, scholars have produced a wealth of compelling information about the college choice process, yet there is still much to learn about the diversity of students pursuing postsecondary education and the variety of institutions to which they subsequently matriculate, a contribution to which this thesis makes. Although research on college choice is plentiful, this scholarship has remained concentrated on traditional age students defined as being between age 18-23 (Perna, 2006). Thus, a noticeable gap remains in chronicling the college choice process of adult students (Bergerson, 2009; Louie, 2007; Perna, 2006; Trent, Orr, Ranis, & Holdaway, 2007; Tumblin, 2002).
Gaps also still exist in documenting how the college choice experience differs for distinct groups, such as Asian Americans, adults, and immigrants, as well as with regard to institutional settings such as community colleges, proprietary schools, vocational training programs, and historically Black colleges and universities (Bergerson, 2009; Kinser, 2006b; Louie, 2007; Perna, 2006, Teranishi, R. T., Ceja, M., Antonio, A. L., & Allen, W. R., 2004; Tierney, 2013). Considering the high concentration of traditionally underrepresented students attending for-profit institutions (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2015; Iloh & Tierney, 2014; Tierney, 2013), I posit that there is indeed something worth knowing about the decision-making process of students who enroll in less-than-two-year for-profit occupational training programs.

Attention to the college choice experiences of African Americans and Latinos has emerged in the last decade or so; however, research in this area is certainly not exhaustive (Freeman, 1997, 2005; Kiyama, 2010; Oseguera & Malagon, 2011). To date, there has been just a small body of research conducted with regard to for-profit institutions. Many of these studies (i.e., Chung, 2008, 2009; Oseguera & Malagon, 2001) are quantitative and have provided important demographic characteristics of students attending for-profit institutions. An even smaller body of qualitative oriented studies—primarily conducted as dissertation research—have been produced. The most closely related to my study on adult choice are Revelle (1997) and Ross-Jones (2006), although neither connected their research to college choice scholarship whatsoever, yet both were conducted at
occupational degree-granting colleges. And although Marecki’s (1985) survey research comparing community college and two-year proprietary college students’ decision making offers a useful lens in thinking about student choice in the for-profit context, his participants are primarily representative of traditional age college-goers. More recently Iloh and Tierney (2014) have investigated rational choice among mixed-age students attending a community college and for-profit college.

In closing, as I engaged in the writing of this report, it struck me as out of place to use the term “college choice” in the context of this study, where my focus in on a non-degree granting, sub-baccalaureate institution. This highlighted the need for update and inclusive terminology that better captures the postsecondary trajectory of all individuals. Hence, going forward I refer to “college choice” as “postsecondary choice” to reflect the larger landscape of options available post high school or GED completion. Although it is not the most elegant term, it addresses a shortcoming that has become quite obvious to me in studying this phenomenon (i.e., selecting a postsecondary pathway). In the context of this study, the word “college,” just seems ill-fitting and hegemonic, reflecting language that serves to constrain thinking about the legitimacy of multiple pathways.

**Narrative Inquiry**

The use of narrative in this research served as the connective tissue in drawing together the various components informing this study. Ravitch and Carl (2015) discuss

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Revelle’s (1997) study examined students’ decisions to attend a degree-granting, private for-profit college as well as a small cosmetology school. Ross-Jones’ (2006) study was conducted at a degree-granting occupational college at which she worked.
the conceptual framework of a research study as akin to an eco-system, in which the researcher makes clear the interdependent relationship between the various strands of literature, theory and a researcher’s beliefs informing a study (p. 40). As I was constructing the proposal for this research, I thought long and hard about my design choices and my ability to capture the data needed to answer the questions I proposed regarding a process scholars framed as complex and developmental in nature (Bergerson, 2009; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, Perna, 2006). Hence narrative became an obvious choice in exploring how adults’ trajectories to postsecondary education take shape amid macro-narratives of how postsecondary education is to be pursued (i.e., bachelor’s degrees as an end goal and the avoidance of for-profit education).

Creswell (2007) describes narrative research as a method that “begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals” to which there are many ways of analyzing (Creswell, 2007, p. 54). Additionally, narrative research is considered an ideal approach in examining phenomenon pertaining to small numbers of participants, which was the intent of this study (Creswell, 2007). As Creswell explains, narrative approaches consists of researchers gathering data through the collection of participants’ stories, reporting participants’ experiences, and organizing a timeline of how their experiences make sense in some larger framework or period of participants’ lives (p. 54). Thus, these elements map well onto the study of individuals’ college choice processes against the backdrop of social discourses on postsecondary education.

As Riessman (2008) states, narratives are everywhere. Therefore, in taking up this study, I perceived there to be two particularly prominent discourses circulating about
postsecondary education—which also circulate in the form of narratives—that were essential to framing individuals’ educational choice: the goal of acquiring four-year degree (i.e., the college for all movement) and the notion of for-profit institutions as being an undesirable educational option. In my mind, these two culturally dominant and policy-oriented discourses potentially create a narrow pathway for individuals to work within. Hence I wondered about how people navigated their way through and around these discourses.

As Lyotard (1984) and Foucault’s (1972) work reveals, the way in which the larger world is storied is hardly neutral, and is in fact represented by competing stories of how the world operates according to differently situated people. Foucault’s work provides a framework for understanding how things, people, behaviors, and institutions are socially constructed as having a particular type of value and meaning (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Morrell, 2008). Lyotard (1984) provides a critique of the one-size-fits-all grand narratives or “meta-narratives” of life by highlighting the importance of micronarratives, which take into account individuals’ unique perspectives.

Much of the scholarship and literature produced on the topic postsecondary education paints it as an important and necessary step in U.S. culture. A common cultural understanding of what it takes to get ahead in life is principally based on the foundation that education is the way to social mobility and economic prosperity (Carnevale et al., 2013), which operates in conjunction to another essential core belief of getting ahead in life: meritocracy. The ubiquity of this discourse is practically inescapable in U.S. culture as it is widely propagated in schools, at church or temple, on the news, via public policy
and within families at home. Thus my use of narrative in this thesis was built on the assumption that students’ storying of their pathways to a for-profit postsecondary institution would illuminate important information about their exposure and response to grand-narratives about educational attainment in the U.S. and how they make sense of these discourses in their own situated contexts, as Perna’s (2006) model speaks to. Thus, participants’ processes of postsecondary choice, as well as how they respond to various discourses regarding educational attainment and institutional type, were at the heart of this study.

The most widely circulating narrative of students’ experiences with for-profit education is negative and typically goes in the order of students being lured to institutions by unscrupulous admissions representatives or other corporate measures (e.g., lead generators), who are then duped into signing up for programs that have virtually no value to their lives (Deil-Amen, 2014; Jackson, 2015; Shinoda, 2013). Although there is certainly truth to this particular storying of students’ enrollment at proprietary schools, it is not necessarily representative for the whole universe of students’ experiences with this sector of postsecondary education (Brandt, 2001; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006; Ross-Jones, 2006; Vital-Howard, 2006). Secondly, for-profit education students are often presented as devoid of having any agency or knowledge with regard to their decision making, which, from a critical literacy perspective, constructs them as “passive consumers or social dupes” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 120). I went into this study questioning how accurate this depiction might be as there is no research that I could find that provided in-depth accounts of adults’ lives leading up to their decision making
or the processes to which they engaged in at arriving at a for-profit institution as an educational choice. Thus, I approached this study with an eye towards capturing a fuller picture of adult students’ life experiences which may help us better understand them as decision makers.

The question of why students elect to attend proprietary schools amid a host of more affordable and reputable institutions is perplexing to many individuals who have ever pondered about this topic. Within a handful of studies that employ a qualitative component in exploring for-profit college choice, students’ accounts of postsecondary choice reveal a less sinister account about entering such institutions, and further provide a more agentic framing of their choice (Iloh & Tierney, 2014; Revelle, 1997; Ross-Jones, 2006).

In Deborah Brandt’s (2001) life history research, which focused on the evolution of literacy demands in Americans’ lives throughout the 20th century, she provides a successful account of one young woman who attended one of the earlier versions of for-profit postsecondary education at a time when women and the poor were grossly under-represented in postsecondary education. Many still argue today that for-profit education continues to provide similar access and opportunity to those who were normally disenfranchised from higher education, a narrative which has served as a life-saving umbrella to their survival in recent history amid calls to rid of for-profit education altogether (Borrego, 2002; Burd, 2003; Jackson, 2015; Shinoda, 2013; Tierney, 2013).

Brandt’s (2001) use of life history research, which constitutes one form of narrative research, offers a compelling example of the way in which narrative can inform
our understanding of how individuals experience and respond to forces of the larger world, particularly around issues of education and literacy. In Tierney and Colyar’s (2009) edited volume on the college access experiences of traditional-age students, they and their associates employed cultural biography, another variation of narrative research, as a method of creating in-depth portraits of students’ situated experiences with regard to college access. Similar to what Tierney (2009) writes about the importance of making the exploration of individual lives the central focus to informing policy, I approached this study from a practitioner’s perspective of using “individual life stories” (p. 4) to highlight the needs of a growing body of adults pursuing postsecondary education, for whom we have little knowledge of their educational choice processes.
CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this dissertation, I set out to learn about how adults, age 25 and older, make sense of the discourses surrounding postsecondary education and their subsequent choice to attend a for-profit institution in a metropolitan region that boasts a wide array of postsecondary options. I assumed going into this study that most people were familiar with the negative reputation of for-profit education given the ubiquity of critiques made about them through various media outlets (Internet, newspapers, Department of Education reports, etc.), and was thus curious about students’ reasons for enrolling in such institutions, which I posited might be a subversive act toward dominant cultural values of education as propagated through the college for all movement (Carr, 2013; Rosenbaum, 2001). In other words, an underlying assumption I had about students’ decisions to select a for-profit institution was that it represented an agentic move, and one that was potentially informed by other ways of knowing the world. Having grown up amongst the poor and working class, I have witnessed the resourcefulness of people getting by in their circumstances and with tremendous insight about the world from their vantage point (Campano & Damico, 2007). However, I quickly learned that my knowledge of the for-profit sector was largely shaped by my membership in the higher education community, and that what I knew was not necessarily common knowledge despite the public discourse about these institutions seemingly taking place at the federal, state and local levels, which illuminated important issues concerning the languaging and identity of postsecondary proprietary institutions.
A second, yet equally important goal of my study, was to understand what the college choice process is like for adults in the context of selecting a for-profit institution. Much of the existing scholarship on college choice focuses on the experiences of traditional-age (i.e., 18-23 year olds), four-year college goers (Perna, 2006). Given the age difference at which this life event occurred, I wondered about the way in which the themes (e.g., family influence, academic preparedness, guidance) often cited in college choice literature were salient in adulthood. More specifically, I wondered about what resources they used. What motivations informed their pursuit of formal education? And what time frames and other parameters did they work from? Aside from the age factor, college choice scholarship has been sparse in its treatment of less privileged postsecondary choices such for-profit institutions, and specifically ones that focus on conferring career diplomas and certificates (Kinser, 2006b; Perna, 2006; Tierney, 2013).

**Rationale of Methodological Approach**

We cannot study lived experience directly because language, speech, and systems of discourse mediate and define the very experience we attempt to describe. We study the representations of experience, not experience itself.

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 51)

In this research, which I situate within interpretive and constructivist paradigms, I used a combination of qualitative approaches to answer my research questions. The primary research approach employed in conducting this study is narrative inquiry, which was complimented with other related qualitative approaches (i.e., discourse analysis, document analysis) as Riessman (2008) states is possible (p. 12). My decision to examine
adults’ college choice experiences using a narrative approach responds to that fact that prominent models of college choice (e.g., Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006) depict this experience as a lifelong developmental process that is also socially situated. This scenario obviously poses significant challenges for researchers to study college choice as it is simply not about the end point decision that students make. Instead, we must know something about the body of experiences throughout an individual’s life in order to understand their educational trajectories beyond secondary school. As such, narrative inquiry offers the epistemological and ontological basis for using stories, as told by people about their own lives, as a way to examining the meaning of experiences to people’s current constructions of self and the lives they anticipate living in the future (Chase, 2011; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 2008; Wortham, 2001).

Over the past 30 years, narrative research has become a well-established methodological approach in social science research to illuminate how individuals construct meaning of their life experiences through the act of storytelling (Chase, 2011; Cresswell, 2014; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998; Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011; Squire, Davis, Esin, Andrews, Harrison, Hydén, & Hydén, 2014). Although the primary form of narrative data researchers work with is life story interviews, many other possibilities such as diaries, pictures, memory boxes, and letters, can also be analyzed (Chase, 2011; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, 1998; Riessman, 2008; Squire et al., 2014). In the most recent edition of the *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Chase (2011) summarizes a common understanding of narrative amongst scholars as:
a distinct form of discourse: as meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience, a way of understanding one’s own or others’ actions, or organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time. (p. 415)

As such, people are believed to often use stories as a way to interpret their world, thus providing researchers rich data sources to which they can explore particular experiences of people’s lives more holistically.

In practice, narrative research permits participants to “story” the events of their lives in a manner that captures their past, present, and possibly future orientations to issues and events (Riessman, 2008; Seidman, 2006; Wortham, 2001). These storied versions of the self and one’s experiences become data to which researchers conduct analysis of using a variety of techniques, as stories themselves fail to be self-explanatory in their own right (Seidman, 2006; Riessman, 2008). Embedded in these stories are clues to the sense making that individuals engage in about their own life experiences, which analysts can uncover through interrogating the how and why of participants’ language use, in addition to the content of their stories (Riessman, 2008; Wortham, 2001). Hence it appears to be a rich and informative way to analyze the concepts that I have put forth regarding Freire’s reading the world as a text (Freire & Macedo, 1987), understanding the ways in which postsecondary education is discoursed and subsequently taken up by specific consumers in the education marketplace, and in identifying counter-narratives to the pervasive discourses about postsecondary education broadly, and for-profit education specifically. Chase’s (2011) declaration that narrative research is powerful in its ability to
illuminate how individuals resist being constrained by cultural discourses also supports my use of narrative in this study (p. 422).

Strong proponents of narrative research methodologies have provided compelling statements as to why narrative is an ideal choice for research that aims to elicit a deep understanding about life experiences. Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach & Zilber (1998) posit that “narrative methods can be considered ‘real world measures’ that are appropriate when ‘real-life problems’ are investigated” (p. 5). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) emphasize that “to use narrative inquiry is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomena under study” (p. 477), although Rymes (2010) cautions against their assertion that stories/narratives are mere portals to experience (p. 372). Instead, individuals’ stories must be understood in terms of the “storytelling event and how the roles in that event influence the story being told” (Rymes, 2010, p. 372). Nonetheless, in situations when we cannot study events as they unfold, as with ethnographic research, narratives have become an effective means to exploring lived experience as told by those who experienced it first-hand (Cresswell, 2007; Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; Maynes, Pierce & Laslett, 2008; Maxwell, 2005; Riessman, 2008). Additionally, Chase (2011) and Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) highlight the popularity of narrative research in bringing forth accounts and testimonies of silenced and marginalized members of society, which is congruent with the purposes of this study. Subsequently, a number of studies have been produced that demonstrate the agentic spirit of those who may be discoursed as deviant, abnormal, or positioned in some other marginalized way (e.g., people with disabilities (Angrosino, 1994), barren women (Riessman, 2000)).
Although many scholars outside of the narrative inquiry community raise concerns about the truthfulness of interviewees’ accounts, narrative researchers underscore that obtaining verbatim accounts is not of primary importance. Instead, narrative inquirers are interested in the sense-making of experiences that people reveal in their accounts of life events—it is the construction of events and the thoughts and feelings surrounding the experience are most important (Chase, 2011; Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Riessman, 2008; Seidman, 2006). Further, from a poststructuralist lens, narrative researchers perceive that stories told are always partial, interested, and changing (Chase, 2011; Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Kamler, 2001; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 2008; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008; Seidman, 2006).

Much of the research literature suggests that college choice is a developmental process that evolves over the course of many years of a person’s life (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Likewise, college choice has been conceptualized as a process that is greatly influenced by context (Paulsen, 1990; Perna, 2006). Given this dynamic, capturing students’ decision-making process becomes more complex and difficult to nail down in regard to data collection. Therefore, the use of narrative inquiry appeared to be an excellent methodological choice for exploring this phenomenon. Furthermore, as this project evolved, I became interested in exploring how the institution at which I found participants for this study communicated its identity as an education provider amid the negative discourse framing for-profit education. Hence the use of narrative inquiry as a methodological approach was extended to exploring institutional identity as conveyed
through various media (Czarniawska, 1997; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1998; Riessman, 2008).

Note:

A number of scholars speak to the fact that narrative research is a diverse field that includes a wide array of methodological approaches and philosophical orientations (Creswell, 2007; Clandinin, 2013; Riessman, 2008; Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011; Squire et al., 2014). Further, the word narrative itself has received considerable attention amongst scholars as the term appears to have inconsistent meanings across those who embrace the idea of using stories as data. Squire et al. (2014) describe the range of meanings of “narrative” in the following way:

Stories as accounts of temporally ordered events, or as developing or expressing personal identity, or telling about events, or as developing or expressing personal identity, or telling about the past, or making sense of mental states or emotions, or having particular social effects, or demonstrating formal linguistic properties. (p. 6)

Squire et al. (2014) further underscore that these definitions of “narrative” often consist of more than one component and may overlap in meaning, thus making it difficult to distinctly categorize the various notions of narrative (p. 6). In Creswell’s (2007) overview of narrative research as a qualitative research approach, he underscores that narrative is a method as well as a phenomenon (p. 54). Similarly, the words story and narrative are also applied inconsistently across scholars. For instance, Riessman (2008) states that she uses story and narrative interchangeable (p. 7), whereas Squire et al. (2014) make a
distinction in calling participants’ “recounted sequences of events” stories and the “organized, plotted, interpreted accounts of events” constructed by researchers and others, narratives (p. 6-7). Simply put, narrative may be constituted as “any text or discourse, or, it might be text used within the context of a mode of inquiry in qualitative research (Chase, 2005), with a specific focus on the stories told by individuals (Polkinghorne, 1995)” (Creswell, 2007, p. 54), which aligns with my purposes.

To provide some clarity about my own understanding and employment of narrative research in this study, I offer the following declaration about the tenets of narrative research that I embraced in this research. My framing of narrative is actually an amalgamation of several scholars’ discussions of the affordances of storytelling as a means of representing experience (e.g., Chase, 2012; Clandinin, 2013; Cresswell, 2007; Riessman, 2008). Creswell (2007) highlights what I have noted in simply reading across various scholars’ renderings of narrative research that there is no particular “lock-step approach” in conducting narrative research; but rather, a list of recommended considerations to ethically negotiate with regard to collecting people’s stories, analyzing those accounts, and “restorying” the experiences shared by research participants (p. 55-57). As such, I constructed my own approach using guidance from the work of scholars such as Riessman (2008), Seidman (2006), Wortham (2001), and Schaafsma and Vinz (2011), which was complimented by guidance from Maxwell (2005, 2013), Miles et al. (2013), and Rubin and Rubin (2005).

In this research, I use the term narrative inquiry and narrative research interchangeably, as my reading across various scholars on this subject have not yet
provided a strong enough rationale or argument about asserting a difference between these terms. Although I am aware that some scholars, such as Clandinin (2013), call for a distinction to be made in what constitutes narrative and narrative inquiry vs. narrative research, Riessman’s (2008) work, which served as an influential guide in my analytical process of interview data, embraces the term *narrative inquiry* for what I did in this study. Thus I refer to my research methodology as narrative inquiry. In my own interpretation of narrative research/narrative inquiry, I understand it as the process of collecting stories from individuals, organizations, etc., to which a range of analytical procedures may be applied in analyzing and interpreting them to construct meaning.

**Site and Participant Selection**

There were a number of challenges in identifying participants for this study. Unlike the case of high school students, there are few institutional spaces where adults can be found at once making decisions about entering postsecondary education. Hence my initial strategy was to recruit participants for this study through an actual institution where they were enrolled in a program of study. However, as Bush (2010) writes, gaining access to for-profit institutions as a researcher is a challenge (p. 63). When I first defended my proposal in 2012, I immediately experienced an issue with access in communicating directly with a school, and consequently had to rethink my strategy going forward. For the 2012-2013 academic year, I shelved my work on this study for personal reasons, but returned to it in fall of 2013 with an expanded strategy that included working through institutions/organizations such as Pennsylvania CareerLink offices, Literacy Councils, and adult-serving TRIO Programs to recruit participants singularly through a
purposive selection strategy. I also disseminated recruitment materials through friends, family, and colleagues.

Maxwell (2013) describes purposive selection as the researcher’s targeted selection of participants, activities, or settings that is believed to lead to gathering the data necessary to answer one’s proposed research questions (p. 97). As this study involved learning about a specific population’s experiences (i.e., adults age 25 and older) with a process (i.e., postsecondary education choice) involving a particular category of education (2-year or less education at a for-profit institution), a purposive selection of participants was essential.

Following receipt of Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this study, I proceeded in using multiple strategies to locate participants through my personal network and via cold calling institutions and organizations. Although I received a very positive response from many of the people and organizations I reached out to, few led me to the actual audience I was seeking: adults attending or planning to attend a two-year or less for-profit postsecondary school. In part, this had to do with staff dissuading students from even considering a for-profit institution. Eventually, however, it was through the friend of a colleague that I was granted access to a non-degree granting for-profit school to recruit students for this study.

The Research Site

Pyramid Career School (pseudonym) is a relatively small for-profit postsecondary institution that is part of a larger corporate network of postsecondary level schools across the U.S., some of which operated as “colleges” and conferred associate’s and bachelor’s
degrees. Pyramid, however, only provided training that resulted in the issuance of career diplomas or certificates. The school had actually succeeded another well-known for-profit school that was closed and renamed as part of a corporate takeover. Accredited by the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, Pyramid was eligible to participate in federal financial aid programs such as Pell grants and Direct Student Loans. It was also approved to operate as a private licensed school in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (PA Dept. of Education, n.d.).

Pyramid Career School was located just on the outskirts of the city of Philadelphia, and was easy to reach via public transportation. According to the College Navigator tool sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.), Pyramid enrolled that fewer than 400 student in Fall 2013. Ninety-nine percent of the students received financial aid, with over 90% utilizing the federal loan program. Additionally, over 70% of the students enrolled were female, and over 50% of all students were age 25 or older (IES College Navigator, n.d.). Over 90% of the students were Pennsylvania residents (IES College Navigator, n.d.). Estimates of the student body racial composition revealed that almost 50% of the students were Black/African American, approximately 25% were Caucasian, fewer than 10% Hispanic/Latino, and the remainder of the student body was a mix of Native American/Alaskan, Asian, Bi- or Multiracial, and “Race/Ethnicity unknown” students (IES College Navigator, n.d.).

Most programs at the school could be completed in approximately nine months to one year if attending on a full-time basis. Students had the option of attending during the day or in the evening. Programs of study ranged from approximately $16,000 to
approximately $22,000 (Pyramid Prospective Student Catalog, 2014). Two of the most popular programs were medical billing and coding and medical assisting (Jordan, admissions rep, personal communication, June 25, 2014). The NCES’s College Navigator tool also reported an overall graduation rate at Pyramid Career School exceeding 70% for those who began their programs in fall 2010. The graduation rate was similar for those who entered in 2009.

The school was housed in a large building in close proximity to a popular shopping area. The interior space felt large and spacious. Overall, the facility appeared relatively clean and bright. Some classrooms had overhead projectors and computers; others were set up with equipment and furniture to simulate patient rooms where students practiced skills and techniques required of their career tracks (e.g., medical assistants, massage therapy). There was a small combined library and tutoring center available in the back of the building that students seemed to congregate at while I was visiting. Additionally, there was a fairly large student lounge outfitted with vending machines, a sink and microwave, and plenty of seats and tables for students to gather at.

One of the first things I notice upon my first visit was that incoming and outgoing traffic was closely monitored. As visitors arrived through the front entrance, they had to sign in and wait in a lounge area to be called back to see one of the staff. In the waiting area was a huge flat screen television that repeatedly played an infomercial featuring all the various schools owned by Pyramid’s parent company.
Recruitment and Study Participants

Participants of this study were all recruited at a single for-profit institution, which I have pseudonymed “Pyramid Career School,” located in suburban Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As mentioned earlier, I negotiated access to Pyramid Career School through the assistance of a colleague who had a friend that worked as an admissions representative at the school. Through my colleague, I initially provided my contact at Pyramid with information about my study and recruitment materials that I would distribute to potential participants who fit the eligibility criteria of the study. After seeking permission from his supervisors, my contact at Pyramid Career School, Jordan, received authorization from his supervisors allowing me to solicit students for my research. Initially, it was not clear how many students I would be able to recruit, but eventually Jordan made it clear that he would assist me in obtaining as many students as I needed. Because narrative research is considered a form of case study research, it is typically conducted with a small number of participants (Creswell, 2014; Riessman, 2008). Thus, early on my goal was to interview at least six people for this research.

Many of the students I interviewed were invited to do so by the admissions representative, Jordan, as opposed to them responding to an open call to participate in this study. There are, of course, pluses and minuses to this strategy. However, I do not believe that this process resulted in any serious consequences to the validity of my findings. If anything, the students’ relationship with Jordan was a plus in getting students to trust me as an outsider to this context. I should also clarify that Jordan collaborated with students in generating potential participants. Don, who was my first recruit, helped in identifying
Whilomena as a potential interview candidate, as he knew her from the bus ride to school. Jordan tracked her down and asked if she would participate, and she agreed. In all, Jordan solicited four students (Don, Whilomena, Gervais, and Mack) on my behalf to participate in the study. Upon first meeting each participant, I explained the study and provided each person with a participant information sheet and two copies of the consent form, one of which they kept. I also informed each participant at the first meeting that they were under no obligation to participate in the study. All affirmed that they were interested and willing to participate.

In addition to Jordan’s help, an instructor that I became friendly with during my visits also assisted me with recruiting students, as did my participants. The faculty member volunteered to help me as he, too, was interested in completing a doctoral program. Through the faculty member and students, the following additional people were recruited: Tamara, Vivian, and Heaven. In total, seven (7) students from Pyramid Career School participated in this study.

I followed similar procedures in telling students privately that their participation was completely optional. All were eager to participate. Tamara, in fact, called me after hearing about the study through her instructor and fellow students. Vivian, I met during tutoring hours in which the instructor supervised. Heaven was a friend and classmate to many of the other students.

To be eligible for the study, participants were required to be at least 25 years of age and enrolled in a for-profit institution that did not confer credential greater than an associate’s degree. Each participant was offered a small incentive of $15 for each of the
two 45-60 minute formal interviews. I also gave a book of inspirational reading to both Don and Whilomena based on the nature of our conversations. No other incentives were provided to participants. Table 2 below provides a brief demographic overview of the participants of this study.

Table 2

Research Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Program of Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Medical Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whilomena</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Medical Billing &amp; Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mack</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Medical Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heaven</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Medical Billing &amp; Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivian</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Medical Billing &amp; Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamara</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Medical Billing &amp; Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gervais</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Massage Therapy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All names are pseudonyms.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection for this study took place between March 2014 and August 2014. In addition to conducting in-depth interviews with participants to collect their stories about pursuing admission to a less-than-two-year for-profit institution, other data
informing this research includes interviews and conversations with school personnel, field notes, research memos, research journaling, institutional documents and artifacts, and an online Qualtrics survey administered to all the student participants. Although interview transcripts are the most popular form of data used in narrative research (Chase, 2011; Riessman, 2008), narrative research scholars highlight the value of multiple sources of data in generating a complete understanding of phenomena that is consistent with conducting rigorous qualitative research generally (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2014; Riessman, 2008; Squire et al., 2014).

**Interviews**

In order to access the information I needed to answer the research questions guiding this study, it was essential that I talk to adults who had experienced the decision-making process of selecting a for-profit institution (Maxwell, 2014). Hence I constructed a semi-structured interview protocol to guide my exploration of their experiences using Seidman (2006) and Rubin and Rubin’s (2005) recommendations for interviewing. Although Seidman does not refer to himself as a narrative researcher, his “in-depth, phenomenologically-based interview approach” parallels the goals of narrative scholars to have participants reconstruct their experience “within the topic under study” (p. 15), which in this case involves educational decision making. Specifically, Seidman (2006) provided insight about constructing questions that covered before, during and after components of participants’ experiences with the phenomenon of postsecondary choice. I modified his approach by reducing the interviews to two rather than three. Both Seidman
(2006) and Rubin and Rubin’s texts provided guidance in constructing main questions vs. the use of probes and follow-up questions (p. 152-172).

Between the period of March 2014-June 2014, each participant completed at least two one-hour interviews with me on the school’s premises. Typically, participants completed both interviews within a week of one another, as suggested by Seidman (2006), and most interviews lasted beyond an hour—upwards of 2.5 hours in some cases. All participants were offered a small incentive of $15 for their participation, which was paid in cash at the conclusion of each interview. My contact at the school, Jordan, provided me with an empty classroom to which I could conduct the interviews in privacy. All of the participants were day attendees of the school, so the interviews were conducted at the end of their school day (approximately 12 noon). All interviews were digitally recorded and later entirely transcribed verbatim without any attempts to “clean up” either participants’ or my wording (Ravitch & Carl, 2015).

I also communicated with participants via phone, e-mail, and in person to either share information, ask for additional information, clarify interview data, and to generally see how they were doing. This occurred throughout the subsequent year as I was analyzing data and writing my thesis. One such contact was when the institution closed. Once I learned of the school’s scheduled closing, I followed up with students individually to provide them with information about debt cancellation, obtaining transcripts, etc., in the event of an institution closing, as the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has procedures in place to assist students in such cases.
Survey

In July 2014, following the completion of my formal interviews, I e-mailed students a short survey via Qualtrics, an online survey service, to clarify which resources (e.g., Gainful Employment Info, Occupational Handbook Guide, U.S. Department of Education Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs) each participant accessed in his or her decision making process to attend Pyramid Career School. As I listened to the interviews, I noticed that I did not have a consistent accounting of resources that participants used in their search process. Some resources were mentioned in interviews, but not all participants were so explicit. I also thought the survey might help participants with recall, and give me a more concrete picture of what participants used or did not use. The survey can be found in Appendix B.

Five of the 7 participants of this research responded to the survey. Whilomena and Mack did not respond to the survey. I learned that Mack experienced some personal setbacks with his health and living situation. I also later found out that Whilomena did not have Internet service where she was residing.

Research Journals

Prior to beginning data collection in the field, I regularly journaled about the process of launching my study, which was helpful in tracking potential places and contacts regarding participant recruitment, documenting resources available to support adults with entering postsecondary education (e.g., career fairs, non-traditional student forums), completing institutional review board requirements, and noting incremental
challenges and successes pertaining to my launching of this research (Maxwell, 2013, p. 105). Once I began conducting interviews, I regularly wrote about these sessions within 24 hours, making note of anything that stood out to me or issues that I wanted to follow up on further with participants (Maxwell, 2013). In the end, I amassed two electronic journals and two physical journals.

**Field Notes**

These are notes that I took while on-site or immediately leaving a site that documented my observations of the school environment or conversations that I had with people with whom I did not record the discussion (Maxwell, 2013, p. 87-88). Field notes generally took place on small tablet or a piece of paper. They were converted into expanded write-ups in my research journal(s) typically within 24 hours, as suggested by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011).

**Research Memos**

I completed research memos periodically within my research journals as the need arose (Maxwell, 2013, p. 105). These memos were done to help tease out my thinking around emerging themes as well as to process the combination of data as in the case of constructing an identity of Pyramid using participants’ stories, staff stories, and institutional artifacts (e.g., website, physical facilities, admissions materials, mission statement). Many scholars support the use of research memos as a way to analyze data (e.g., Maxwell, 2013; Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2015). In a similar vein, Richardson and St. Pierre (2008) promote writing as a form of inquiry,
analysis, and thinking (p. 484), which I found to be true in my research process. At several points during this research, I stopped to engage in reflective writing to sort out issues regarding my own positionality in this research as the need arose.

**Qualitative Documents, Artifacts, and Audio and Visual Materials**

Bowen (2009) asserts that documents “can provide data on the context within which research participants operate” (p. 29), which can be used to “verify findings or corroborate evidence from other sources” (p. 30). This aligns with Maxwell’s (2013) assertions about data collecting in qualitative research as including “virtually anything that you see, hear, or that is otherwise communicated to you while conducting the study” (p. 87). Therefore, I collected data that included photos of Pyramid Career School, the official catalog provided to prospective students, financial aid paperwork and a complete admissions packet from one participant (Heaven), screenshots of Pyramid’s website, and a copy of the online video shown to prospective students, as these were items students interacted with in their decision making experiences (Maxwell, 2013, p. 87-88).

Scholars’ research on the messaging of institutional documents, such as college view books, college and university websites, and higher education mission statements (e.g., Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Hartley & Morphew, 2008; Saichaie & Morphew, 2014) provide a compelling case for the inclusion of such documents in conducting research on students’ educational decision-making. I also collected information about outreach programs targeted to adults in reference to postsecondary education in the Philadelphia region to get an understanding of supports targeting this audience. Narrative researchers such as Czarniawska (1997), Riessman (2008), and Squire et al. (2014)
provide support for the inclusion of these data to support the overall aims of a research project.

DATA ANALYSIS

This research sought to answer different kinds of questions; therefore, it required different types of analyses (e.g., narrative analysis, discourse analysis, and artifact/document analysis) of various types of data collected (e.g., interviews, field notes, documents and artifacts). Below is a discussion of each of my data analysis processes for different aspects of this project.

Participants’ Interview Data

I analyzed participant interviews for two distinct purposes. The first was to identify themes pertaining to participants’ pathways to Pyramid Career School, and second, to examine participants’ understanding of for-profit education and how that might have influenced their enrollment decision making. Consequently, this entailed the use of multiple analytical treatments of the interview data, which readers will find denoted as Part 1 and Part 2. Part 1 of my analysis pertained to the first set of my research questions, in which I inquired about how participants engaged in postsecondary choice and the resources they employed in their decision-making processes. Part 2 emerged as a result of my suspicions that students may not have understood the notion of for-profit education; hence, I sought to confirm this through discourse analytic techniques. Additionally, I analyzed participants’ interviews to determine their readings of Pyramid as an educational provider in general.
Part 1: Case Study Chapters and Summative Data Chapter. Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 were constructed in response to research questions 1, 1a, 1b, and 2a, which served as the basis for my choice of narrative inquiry as the primary research methodology for this study. Narrative research scholars highlight that there is no one way to do narrative research, and that one’s approach to data analysis, in particular, can be quite varied (Andrews, Squire, Tamboukou, 2013; Riessman, 2008). Despite, this narrative scholars cite that this is not a license for anything goes (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998); hence my approach is based on a blended combination of recommendations by scholars such as Maxwell (2013), Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), Riessman (2008), Schaafsma and Vinz (2011), Seidman (2006), with Riessman’s framing of narrative thematic analysis serving as my primary guide.

My analytic treatment of participants’ interviews occurred roughly in five stages. First, I began my analysis of the interviews by simply listening to them (Maxwell, 2013, p. 105). As I conducted interviews with participants, I regularly listened to the recordings almost immediately afterwards to (a) begin making sense out of their stories; (b) identify gaps or perceived inconsistencies in what they had shared in preparation for a follow-up interview; (c) reflect on participants’ accounts in reference to my theoretical framing of this study; and (d) assess the assumptions embedded within my proposed research questions, which were slightly modified along the way as Maxwell (2013) and other scholars state is common practice.

In these initial reviews, which involved repeated listenings, I recorded notes in my research journal about noticings that were intuitively prominent about participants’
postsecondary choice journeys (Maxwell, 2013, p. 105). These were not codes per se, but jottings of details that helped to center my focus on attributes of participants’ experiences. Seidman (2006) discusses using such a process with transcripts (p. 117); however, I applied it to listening to the interviews as suggested by Maxwell (2013). Undoubtedly, this analysis was somewhat informed by earlier reading of college choice scholarship. However, I also took an attentive stance in listening for differences from what I already knew about college choice as this demographic and context are still relatively new research areas in college choice scholarship (Perna, 2006; Tierney, 2013). My listening to the interviews was accompanied with lots of writing, periodically in the form of analytic memos, to help flesh out beginning themes. Richardson and St. Pierre, (2008) among other scholars (e.g., Maxwell), underscore the facilitative nature of writing and thinking to flesh out ideas. Hence the practice of writing was an integral part of my recursive analytic process, resulting in two physical journals and two electronic journals. I sought to later confirm these initial findings in the actual coding of my interview transcripts.

The second phase of my analytical process began with me actually transcribing the interviews using ExpressScribe transcription software with a foot pedal. I began this process in August 2014 after a lengthy task of converting the digital recordings from .wmv to mp3 files, as required by the free, Mac version of the transcription software I had access to. Riessman (2008) asserts that the process of transcription is in itself an important form of analysis: “Some mistakenly think the task is technical, and delegate it. However, transcription is deeply interpretive as the process is inseparable from language
theory” (p. 29). As Riessman (2008) and Seidman (2006) note, this was a long and tedious process, yet one that I believe brought me intimately close to my data which represented the lives I was trying to study. My transcriptions were done using a modified version of Gail Jefferson’s transcription symbols for conversational analysis (http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/schegloff/TranscriptionProject/page1.html), for I anticipated that I would use discourse analysis as one of my analytic methods later on. A guide to my transcription symbols may be found in Appendix C.

Due to the time consuming nature of transcription work, I found it challenging to complete all the work in a timely manner and hence I enlisted the help of my sister, Karen, to transcribe three sets of interviews (i.e., Whilomena, Mack, and Tamara). I reviewed her transcriptions for accuracy and decided to apply transcription symbols only as needed, hence readers may notice some difference in the way transcript data samples appear. As I transcribed my own tapes and edited the transcripts my sister typed, I made jottings and highlighted noticings within those transcripts. Many of these were converted into codes that fit Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña’s (2014) category of “affective” coding, which pertained to participants’ articulation of emotions, values and evaluation (p. 75).

Thirdly, I began to formally read and thematically code the interview transcripts using a deductive coding process based on Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model, which breaks college choice into phases that I could use to organize aspects of these adults’ postsecondary choice experiences (Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber, 1998; Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2014; Riessman, 2008; Seidman, 2006). These phases or stages (Hossler and Gallagher use both terms in the explanation of their model), however, were not
constructed with adults in mind. Nor did they really take into account the institutional context of Pyramid Career School—a for-profit non-degree granting school—which in the larger world of postsecondary education in the U.S., is an unpopular choice. Hence I made interpretations about the alignment of participants’ experiences with Hossler and Gallagher’s phases of college choice, and then used Perna’s (2006) model as a secondary analytical guide, which helped to frame/contextualize the reasons and rationales surrounding participants’ decision making. From my assessment, the Hossler and Gallagher model offered a durable initial template on which to map my participants’ postsecondary choice experiences, although the themes emerging in these adults’ experiences somewhat differed from the theorizing of traditional-age students’ experiences of college choice. In this regard, Perna’s model encourages a more refined reading and mapping of circumstances surrounding participants’ decision making.

Fourth, I proceeded to inductively code the transcripts using Riessman’s thematic analysis approach. Riessman (2008) writes that thematic analysis focuses on what is told rather than how stories are told, which was important to this particular research. Often I applied holistic coding to larger pieces of transcript data which pertained to bounded talk around a particular topic, story, explanation, etc. This corresponds to Riessman’s (2008) recommendation to “preserve sequences rather than thematically coding segments” (p. 74).

Often thematic analysis hides the role of the interviewer/audience in the co-constructed data that appears in reports (p. 58). I, however, resist that approach and include my own participation in the interviews. This move corresponds to Mishler’s
(1986) framing of interviewing as “forms of discourse...speech events whose structure and meaning is jointly produced by interviewers and interviewees” (p. 105). I also found Schaafsma and Vinz’s (2011) concepts of salience, incompleteness, and emphasis as useful interpretive lenses in analyzing participants’ transcripts (p. 78-79). Schaafsma and Vinz describe salience as aspects of the narrative that resonate or stays with the analyst: “…What bits of dialogue, moments in the narrative linger and endure?” (p. 78).

Incompleteness pertains to “obvious silences,” “lingering puzzlements, and instances where narrators gloss over parts of their stories” (p. 79). Emphasis refers to “events, dialogue, [and] memories...[that] are intensified through repetition, vivid imagery [and] dialog” (p. 79). Schaafsma and Vinz further ask, “Is there a central (focal point) to be exhumed from underneath the details of this narrative moment? What reveals meaning?” (p. 79).

After marking up the transcripts by hand, I transferred the codes to paper or a word document to evaluate which ones were persistent as a theme and to determine how codes related to one another in order to reduce the number of codes, which Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) refer to as “pattern coding” (p. 86). As I successively completed first and second cycle coding for each participant’s transcripts, I tracked connections across their cases in my research journal.

Lastly, I went back to the data to conduct a tracing of dialogue between myself and some participants as I was curious about the evolution of themes, and further, I wanted to give careful consideration to talk that seemed off-topic. This analysis was, in fact, very important to understanding implicit meanings behind the postsecondary choice
experiences these participants shared. In the vein of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña’s (2014) description of coding as “a heuristic--a method of discovery,” I reflected on the “core content and meaning” of whole accounts and bounded narratives within participants’ interviews (p. 73), and was able to identify larger meanings that participants’ associated to their choice of institution and even what furthering their education personally meant to their lives. In my reading of college choice scholarship, this aspect is often unaddressed, but should be taken up more seriously as it could shed light on why some students persist or not. The pervasive discourse about pursuing postsecondary education--particularly in regard to bachelor’s degree attainment—potentially constrains or masks important desires and interests individuals have (Freeman, 2005; Rosenbaum, 2011).

**Part 2: Discourse Analysis for Languaging Chapter.**

*Participant Interviews.*

Chapter 8 was constructed to answer research questions 2, 2a, and 2b, in which I sought to explore how various stakeholders understand and take up the notion of “for-profit” education and how Pyramid Career School portrayed itself to the world. From an analytical standpoint, I relied on Gee’s (2008) theorizing of language use as anchored in discourses/Discourses, and Wortham and Rymes’s (2003) linguistic anthropological concepts of indexicality, entailment, and emergence in interpreting my interview data around the issue of participants’ understanding of “for-profit” education.

Gee’s (2008) theoretical framing of how the meaning of words is negotiated between speakers via cultural models (i.e., “little stories” p. 8) served as an important
backdrop to my research. Cultural models are deemed to be “a substitute for the term theory,” which in essence, represent people’s postulations of how the world works (Gee, 2008, p. 7). These “little stories,” he asserts, trump the role of standard word definitions in guiding individuals’ understandings of word meanings. As an example, Gee discusses the parameters of applying the term “bachelor” to the Pope and gay men. In this example, he demonstrates that although the Pope and a gay man might be men who have not married by a certain age, the term bachelor would likely seem misapplied to their circumstances due to the backstory of their unavailability to the opposite sex—which is significant to the traditional meaning of this term. Hence Gee asserts that rather than simply using the basic definition of a word, individuals instead follow the “little story” or cultural model they have come to know about how the world works (p. 9). Therefore, multiple interpretations of words and phrases exist according to individuals’ social histories and the context in which utterances are made. Thus, the “meanings of words are not fixed and settled once and for all” (Gee, p. 10). “Meaning is something we negotiate and contest over socially” (Gee, p. 13). Gee further adds that:

When people negotiate over such words and word combinations, they are also negotiating over social issues of moral importance…Socially contested terms are words and word combinations whose cultural models hold implications about “right” and “wrong,” “good” and “bad,” “acceptable” and “not acceptable,…” (Gee, 2008, p. 24)

Arguably, the term for-profit education fits Gee’s (2008) definition of a socially contested word combination given the controversy surrounding this body of institutions. Also important to the purposes of this research is what Gee refers to as the exclusion principle, in which he states:
The meaning of words depends on which other words our use of a word is meant to exclude or not exclude as a possibility...Meaning is always (in part) a matter of intended exclusions and inclusions (contrasts and lack of contrasts) within an assumed semantic field. (Gee, 2008, p. 98).

Hence the exclusion principle underscores the potential that speakers’ use of the same language can actually index different meanings/interpretations (Gee, 2008; Rymes, 2003).

Another analytic tool that I found helpful in making sense of language in my transcript data was tracing the indexical meaning of words and phrases used by participants and me—most notably the term “for-profit.” Rymes (2003) defines indexicality as a practice in which the meaning of utterances is tied to context rather than being arbitrary or purely symbolic (p. 124), and asserts that “all language is indexical to a degree” (p. 125). By examining other words and phrases surrounding a particular word or statement, we may be able to identify “indexical cues” that inform us of “aspects of context” that are relevant to our understanding of a word or phrase’s meaning (p. 125).

Lastly, Wortham’s (2001) concept of emergence in narrative research, which pertains to the marshalling of evidence (i.e., subsequent utterances) over the course of time to confirm one’s interpretation of an initial utterance’s meaning was assistive to my analysis (p. 41). Often there are initial clues that an analyst notices about the meaning of an interaction; however, the confirmability of the analyst’s interpretation remains suspended until additional cues are identified to support it: “In order to interpret or react to an utterance, participants and analysts must attend not only to the moment of utterance but also to some later moment when subsequent context has helped the meaning of the

An example of how I employed these analytical tools is demonstrated in the analysis of a short clip in which I sought to explore participant Mack’s knowledge of the negative reputation surrounding for-profit education in Interview Two.

**Excerpt 1: A Mutual Understanding**

A: Let me ask you this too - in terms of like a lot of career schools and stuff, like a lot will fall into the for profit sector and there has been a lot of feedback about that, like negative publicity. Like do you buy it or do you just, I don’t know, did that ever cross your path or your mind in terms as how schools are situated, like, I don't know.

M: I don't know,

A: What side of the fence

M: Not the schools I have attended. I never found them to say one thing and then something else happen. No, that's never happened. If that was the question

A: Because you know like ITT just had this huge lawsuit or something pulled on them, but there's this whole back and forth between for profit and non-profit.

M: Right

A: I don't know

M: As long as (.) I don't see a problem with people or businesses making money. What I see a problem with is businesses not knowing how much money is enough, okay. (Mack, Interview 2a, lines 59-72, 4-22-14)

In line 14 of Excerpt 1, Mack provides an affirmative response, “Right,” to my inquiry about for-profit education, suggesting that he understood the indexical meaning of this term as I intended it to be understood (i.e., schools that deceitfully operate with the
purpose of enrolling students in bogus educational programs for the sole purpose of
making money without any real concern for training students for jobs). Further, he
elaborates on my inquiry by giving an unsolicited example of the reported abuses of the
for-profit sector, highlighting that he had never experienced a school “say one thing and
then something else happen.” In examining the ongoing construction of this conversation,
one can see that our successive responses converge upon a mutual understanding of for-
profit education. This is one instance in which the concept of emergence was used to
confirm my interpretations of data, and specifically in the case of participants’
understanding of “for-profit education.”

**Staff Conversations/Interviews.**

In addition to interviewing the students, I conversed with faculty and staff at
Pyramid. This data was used to help me in answering research questions 1a, 1b, and 2b.
The handful of staff that I interacted with were very friendly and welcoming to me.
Ironically, the fact that I was in a doctoral program seemed to play an important role in
our kinship. The MBC instructor was in the midst of deciding to pursue a doctorate, and
one of Jordan’s admission colleagues had not long ago earned her doctorate.

Readers should know that I make a distinction between “conversations” and
“interviewing” because with the exception of Jordan, I usually had impromptu
conversations with staff which I eagerly took advantage of to ask questions and let them
know a little about myself as a matter of trust building. None of my conversations with
Pyramid staff were recorded as I felt that I might really be testing the boundaries of my
access to the school. I feared that asking people in this context to allow themselves to be
taped might actually result in the loss of what I perceived to be more valuable opportunities to talk with them casually about the institution, the students, and their roles as admissions representatives. Therefore, instead, I immediately documented the content of those conversations in my field notes and then wrote up this information in my research journal quickly thereafter (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

My analysis of these conversations were less rigorous as described above in my treatment of participants’ interviews. In essence, I sought to gather the staff’s perspectives of the students they served as well as insight about the institutional culture. I also believed these discussions would illuminate how Pyramid viewed itself as a postsecondary education provider. As I prepared the chapter on languaging in the context of for-profit education, I went back to review these entries, noting the themes that emerged pertaining to institutional identity (e.g., what Pyramid thought it provided, whom employees saw themselves serving, and how employees saw Pyramid in relation to other schools.) I also used this data to triangulate my findings in participants’ accounts of postsecondary choice.

**Artifact and Document Analysis**

To answer research questions 1a, 2a, and 2b, I collected data that included photos of Pyramid Career School, the official catalog provided to prospective students, financial aid paperwork and a complete admissions packet from one participant, screen shots of Pyramid’s website, and a copy of the video shown to prospective students online and in the reception area. I reviewed these documents and artifacts as I was in the field collecting data and multiple times thereafter as I engaged in writing my data chapters. Of
most interest to me was the way in which Pyramid portrayed itself as an educational institution and the ways in which they (i.e., the staff, corporate leadership) accomplished this construction of identity. Thus I used document analysis as described by Bowen (2009) as a way to explore these data.

I conducted my own version of Bowen’s (2009) document analysis, which he describes as “skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation” (p. 32) through the course of multiple readings of the materials discussed above. Bowen (2009) describes document analysis as an “iterative process” that “combines elements of content analysis and thematic analysis” (p. 32). Content analysis involves organizing information into categories related to the central research question(s) being explored (Bowen, 2009). As such, Bowen underscores that researchers must demonstrate a “capacity to identify pertinent information and to separate it from that which is not pertinent” (p. 32). Thus, I used my insider knowledge of higher education (e.g., admissions recruiting practices), as well as the readings about college choice (e.g., various sources cited throughout this report), information I obtained from government reports (e.g., gainful employment, loan default policy guidelines), and responses from my participants to guide my analysis and interpretation.

My review of the website entailed viewing it multiple times. I had saved a copy of the video which I was able to copy through the use of my phone. I made note of the range of individuals featured in the video as well as what they communicated. I also made note of my impressions of the video and began to forge themes from the testimonials provided by students in the video, who were actually from multiple campuses throughout
Pyramid’s parent company. I used the various themes communicated in the online student testimonials to also assist in exploring the way in which Pyramid portrayed itself by examining that data against the other data I collected (i.e., staff and students’ interview responses).

In my analysis of Pyramid’s catalog, I paid attention to the layout of the book, the photos that were embedded to communicate an image of Pyramid as an educational provider and the types of students it portrayed as attendees, how Pyramid worded its ownership and management status, and the way in which it described its programs and the training requirements that deemed graduates as employable upon graduation. I also looked for how clearly Pyramid communicated the cost of attendance to students and the policies regarding refunds, payment, credit transfers, etc. Further, I explored the way in which Pyramid discussed job placement and employment potential, as well as the supports student would receive to become career ready and marketable.

**Researcher Positionality & Reflexivity**

In many ways this research is personal to me. Although I have never attended or worked at a for-profit institution, I have been a college access worker (formally and informally) for a long time. Secondly, as a first-generation college goer, I have always felt especially attuned to supporting others embarking in the terrain of tertiary education for it is an arena fraught with pitfalls. If students do not know how the system works and do not have good advocates to help them, they can get hurt—even by well-intentioned institutional supports, community advocates, policy makers, scholars, family members and friends. Therefore, this research is an extension of my personal and professional
interests regarding the welfare of first-generation and culturally under-represented participants in the postsecondary education arena.

After completing a master’s program in the college student personnel track of a counselor education program, I have spent my career in education working in a variety of postsecondary education contexts (public and private institutions, two-year and four-year colleges), engaged with both undergraduate and graduate learners, either in an administrative function, instructor role, or academic support/retention capacity. Similarly, I have attended a range of not-for-profit institutions throughout my own formal education.

Neither of my parents, who were born in the 1920s, experienced postsecondary education. My father never went past the 8th grade because there were no high schools for Black children in his community at the time he grew up in the south. My mother, however, completed high school as a child who was raised in the north. Despite not having a high school diploma, my father had a decent-paying union job after exiting the Navy following WWII, which was not totally uncommon to people of my parents’ era. My mother was a homemaker and served as an important advocator of education in my life, although there were never any assurances that I would attend college. Poor and working class Black people just did not do that in my parents’ era. In my family, graduating from high school alone was considered a very important achievement—and especially from a “good school.” However, at the timing of my late-1960s birth, things were changing with the introduction of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (unbeknownst to me, of course). Still, as a high schooler in the 1980s, I remember a brief moment of
thinking I, too, might enter the Navy as my brothers did if I did not attend college, for I knew that it offered a route to college and other career opportunities. Fingers crossed, I had hoped to attend college, for that was the message promoted at the Catholic high school I attended.

All of my siblings, who are much older than me, engaged in postsecondary education as working adults, often with families in tow. All three of my brothers were eligible to attend school via the GI Bill. Two completed bachelor’s degrees as a result of this opportunity. Both of my sisters attended community college. One graduated, and one is still “in progress.” Aside from my immediate family, I have come to know the stories of many other adult learners who were either friends, colleagues, or students that I worked with. And because of my personal and professional identities, it is not uncommon for family, friends, and colleagues to refer people to me for advice about postsecondary education. As such, I have a lot of anecdotal and experiential knowledge about the experiences of adults engaging in postsecondary education that I know informed my thinking throughout this research.

Another important aspect of my positionality is that this is not the first time that I explored the topic of for-profit education. When I took a higher education course focused on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) in 2006, I completed a short research paper documenting adults’ perceptions of education quality at for-profit institutions. At the time, for-profit education was exploding, and I happened to know three individuals who had recently attended or were in the midst of attending a for-profit postsecondary institution. They were selected because each person had also completed a degree through
the not-for-profit sector already, which I felt offered a platform that we were all familiar with in discussing perceived learning quality differences at for-profit schools. One had an associate’s degree, and the other two had a bachelor’s degree already.

One participant, sought a certificate program at Lincoln Technical Institute in auto mechanic studies. One person was completing her bachelor’s degree at DeVry University, and the final interviewee was completing a master’s degree through the University of Phoenix. My conclusions from that research left me with a more positive perception of for-profit education, which is why my stance throughout this research has been open-minded. As with many conversion experiences regarding stereotyping, personal encounters are very influential to altering the perceptions we have. That is what my initial foray into this topic did for me. My personal stance on for-profit education is that it is not inherently a bad thing. At the heart of this definition is someone making a living out of teaching individuals a skill, trade, or other knowledge. Unfortunately, there are unethical people who get involved in these enterprises, for which we need to find a way to better regulate (Shinoda, 2013). As I have conducted this research, I have come across various stories of people using the for-profit route: some good and some very problematic. Because the negative stories are already so pervasive, I will share a few positive accounts.

As I have talked a lot about my research amongst various audiences, it was revealed to me that a family friend had attended a school to learn about the travel industry in the 1970s, after which she enjoyed a wonderful career working in the travel industry for a major airline and a travel agency until the self-serve, Internet platforms such as
Travelocity and Expedia began to emerge, which changed the industry completely. Second, as I was talking about my research with a superintendent in our Mid-Career doctoral program, he shared that trade schools, such as Lincoln Technical Institute, are exactly where his district hired physical plant personnel, etc. And finally, as I visited doctors’ offices or some other medical facility, I would talk to personnel about where they got their training. One such person was a 20-something male phlebotomist who was charged with drawing blood from me for lab work. I inquired about how he came to becoming a phlebotomist at the University of Pennsylvania’s Student Health Center. He talked about toiling away in random jobs that offered him no future, with which he became discontent. He enrolled in one of the many for-profit schools in Philadelphia and was trained to become a phlebotomist (and medical assistant), which he reported gave him a focused career direction that he really enjoyed. Locating counter-narratives to the pervasive negative accounts of for-profit was something that I was greatly attuned to in the back of mind as I conducted this research. Further, I have noted a growing stance among higher education scholars (e.g., Tierney (2013); Bailey, Badway, & Gumport, 2001) who have asserted a stance in which they express cautious optimism in the potential role that for-profit education might play in meeting the education and training needs of U.S. citizens.
Validity/Trustworthiness

To support theoretical claims, students must demonstrate how they developed and/or used methods appropriate to their research questions, epistemologies, and situated perspectives. Students need to document their sources, and bring the reader along with them as they uncover a trail of evidence, and critically evaluate each piece in relation to others. From the cumulative evidence, the student can then construct an interpretive account of his or her findings, storying the stories collected. (Riessman, 2008, p. 188)

In alignment with Riessman’s statement about demonstrating trustworthiness in narrative research, Ravitch and Carl (2015) describe validity in qualitative research generally as “an active methodological process” which is addressed from the stage of research design through data collection and the preparation of the final report (p. 185). Below I describe the strategies I used to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings presented in this report. Various scholars (e.g., Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2015) speak to the importance of using different evaluative processes and measures in determining the strength of findings found through qualitative research rather than appropriating the metrics of validity and reliability associated with quantitative research (Golafshani, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2015). A widely embraced set of criteria used in evaluating the quality of qualitative research is Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) four constructs of credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability, which I used as a starting point in evaluating what Lincoln and Guba term as the “trustworthiness” of the researcher’s process and findings. Second, I incorporated various other scholars’ recommendations in demonstrating rigor and validity in the employment of specific methodological approaches (e.g., narrative research).
In the remainder of this section I discuss several strategies that were employed throughout the conduction of my research that guided my process of achieving trustworthy findings.

**Credibility**

The construct of credibility parallels the notion of “internal validity” in quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2015; Shenton, 2004), and under the qualitative paradigm pertains to whether research findings represent a credible reading of the situation under study. Ravitch and Carl (2015) highlight that achieving credibility “is directly related to research design and the researcher’s instruments and data” (p. 188). Thus, I used the following strategies in achieving this important construct: thick description; member checking, triangulation, peer debriefing, and prolonged engagement, as described below.

**Thick Description.** Creswell and Miller (2000) describe thick description as researchers providing rich, detailed accounts of the research scenario in a way that permits readers to vicariously experience the events discussed in the study. Similarly, from a narrative inquiry perspective, scholars emphasize the importance of the rhetorical process of re-narrating participants’ stories into believable accounts (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Riessman, 2008; Seidman, 2006). Riessman (2008) handles this, in part, by making visible the “co-constructions” of her interview data. Rather than simply re-narrating participants’ stories, she includes transcripts that reveal her role as the interviewer in the production of participants’ accounts. This helps to illuminate the relational dynamics at play between listener and speaker in the data collection process by
bringing awareness to each person’s subjectivities. In the chapters that follow, readers will note that many of the excerpts included are somewhat lengthy and typically inclusive of my voice as well as that of participants. As college choice has been defined begin greatly influenced by individuals’ background experiences, I also took care in providing extensive details of circumstances leading up to their decision to enroll at Pyramid Career School.

**Member Checking.** I engaged in member checking with study participants to confirm the accuracy of my re-storying their stories and to confirm key findings when possible. One of the challenges of doing research is that participants of studies have varying degrees of interest in participating in the full process. Although all participants were very willing to participate in the interviews, having them commit to engaging beyond that in participation validation activities was not always as easy—more so in regard to reading drafts. Participants, however, were typically very generous in verbally responding to my inquiries. This, of course, presents a limitation in fully ascertaining the strength of my findings. Of those presented in the case studies, only Gervais completely read and provided feedback about my depiction of his account. Heaven expressed being overwhelmed with reading her chapter, on which I actually noted the sections I most wanted her feedback. She was going to ask her teenage child to read her chapter, but realized that the content might actually be upsetting for him/her. Nonetheless, I did verbally articulate many of my findings to her when we met in June 2015, to which she raised no objections. I e-mailed Don his final chapter with notations about the aspects that I particularly wanted his feedback about, but I never got a response. He did,
however, talk to me through February 2015, where I learned that he had graduated from his program at another institution.

Various scholars discuss the challenges I found in conducting participant validation. And I certainly understand why participants may or may not continue to engage in the later parts of the research process. After all, this is my project, to which the benefits and privileges that may potentially result from it are unlikely to be equally shared. Many of my participants had tremendous issues of their own to work through; hence, I must state that I find no fault in their degree of participation in this research beyond the interviews they committed to doing. Some participants had reported having access issues to the Internet, telephone service, and even housing. In some instances, people were dealing with health issues. Therefore, I improvised by using a variety of other strategies to improve the credibility of this research as described in this section.

**Triangulation.** Creswell and Miller (2000) describe triangulation as “a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (p. 126). Scholars commonly describe triangulation being accomplished through multiple ways: “across data sources (i.e., participants), theories, methods (i.e., interviews, observations, documents), and among different investigators” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). My triangulation process centered on looking across data sources and using meaningful multiple methods of data collection. I conducted in-depth interviews with several participants (sources) at a single institution, who experienced the phenomenon under study. I also collected information from participants through a Qualtrics survey. Third, I
collected data from the institution itself, such as various documents and artifacts and interviews with staff members, which were used in developing a comprehensive perspective of my research.

**Prolonged Engagement.** Seidman (2005) states that examining the consistency of participants’ responses over time and across contexts, in which they talk about their experiences directly and indirectly (i.e., expressing thoughts about a topic generally or responding to an artifact) is a way to check for internal consistency, and hence lead to confidence in the validity of participants’ responses (p. 25). I had contact with case study participants beyond the two interviews I asked all participants to commit to, which was very helpful confirming the consistency of participants’ responses over time, in addition to illuminating other important details of their experience. Readers will note that participation validation was spread out across much of the year for most participants—particularly those featured in the case study chapters (Ravitch & Carl, 2015).

**Dependability**

I committed to reporting detailed accounts of my research process, from the design stage to data collection, and how I constructed the findings presented in this dissertation. Hence readers can assess for themselves the rigor and appropriateness of my research process. As Shenton (2004) highlights, reconstructions of qualitative research are difficult to do because of the influence of context; however, highly descriptive accounts may provide something of a “prototype model” for future researchers to use in exploring the same topic (p. 71).
Transferability

As stated earlier, I committed to providing rich detailed accounts of my research process so that others may determine for themselves the generalizability of my findings to their contexts. This is most prominent in the methodology section of this report. Similarly, I attempted to provide as many details as possible about participants’ circumstances within the case study chapters. As recommended by Riessman (2008), I included myself in transcript excerpts to allow readers a glimpse of how participants’ responses evolved from my prompts.

Confirmability

Confirmability pertains to the degree to which research findings are in fact grounded in the data, rather than the researchers own agendas and biases. Hence Maxwell (2005) states that the issue of validity is one of identifying threats—or alternative conclusions to the ones we have posited. In this regard, I incorporated several strategies as follows to avoid this pitfall:

**Dialogic Engagement.** I engaged in what Ravitch and Carl (2015) refer to as dialogic engagement throughout all phases of this research. Dialogic engagement is defined as a combination of practices in which the researcher engages others in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of their research design, analytical process, and findings. Dialogic engagement incorporates practices such as peer debriefing, critical friends, and critical inquiry groups, in which contributors may be insiders or outsiders to the research being conducted (Ravitch & Carl, 2015, p. 201). In this study, I took advantage of numerous opportunities to discuss components of my research with various
interested others, as will be apparent throughout this thesis where I make mention of many of these occasions.

I called upon peers who were both familiar and unfamiliar with my topic to play devil’s advocate with regard to the interpretations that I made and to help me process particularly difficult scenarios. This is also consistent with Connelly & Clandinin (2000) recommendation in which they “encourage narrative inquirers to establish response communities—ongoing places where they can give accounts of their developing work over time” (p. 73). In fall 2014, I enrolled in a dissertation seminar course with Nancy Hornberger, in which I got to talk with fellow students from various programs about my process of analysis, points of difficulty in framing my research, and my emerging findings. Second, for almost year and a half (January 2014-April 2015), I participated in a writing group with two fellow dissertating students in my program. These women were a valuable sounding board as I was launching this study, collecting and analyzing data, and beginning to construct this final report.

Third, my sister, Karen, who transcribed three full sets of participant interviews, served as an important conversation partner as I was analyzing my data and constructing my findings. Her subjectivities as a layperson to higher education, an adult who returned to school late in life, and someone who was in the age group of some of my participants, was helpful in challenging and supporting some of my interpretations of participant data.

Fourth, I spoke with a variety of higher education professionals and college access workers about my topic throughout the duration of my research and writing. Members of the Philadelphia College Prep Roundtable (PCPR), as well as many other
friends and associates outside of PCPR, provided important comments and counterarguments to my shared findings that either made me feel confident about my findings or inspired me to take a second look at my data to insure that I was seeing what I thought I was seeing in the data. They were also a constant reminder of the horrors of for-profit, which served to temper my enthusiasm about the potential of this sector.

**Reflexivity.** The confirmability of my findings was also supported by the reflexive stance I maintained throughout this research. Reflexivity pertains to the researcher remaining “conscious of the biases, values, and experiences that he or she brings to a qualitative research study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 243). Ravitch and Carl (2016) discuss reflexivity as “the systematic assessment of your identity, positionality, and subjectivities” which should occur throughout the duration of a research project (p. 15). Readers will note a number of self-referential comments embedded throughout this document in which I am transparent about assumptions I possessed, how I understood my relationship with participants, and the fears, doubts, and difficulties that I experienced along the way as I completed this study.
Introduction to Data Chapters

Organizing the presentation of my findings from this research came with challenges as there was a significant amount of data to work with, and I needed to simultaneously respond a number of research questions. As Miles, Huberman, and Sandaña (2014) highlight, the writing up and presentation of qualitative research does not share a consistent format that is characteristic of quantitative research reports (p. 324). Hence researchers are granted license in narrating their findings. The data chapters that follow will reveal my uptake of this license.

This brief section, therefore, is intended to inform readers about the presentation of my findings. In the chapters that follow (i.e., Chapters 4, 5 and 6), three of the seven participants’ experiences with postsecondary choice are featured within their own individual chapters. The people presented in these case study presentations were selected because they offer a snapshot of postsecondary choice occurring across different age brackets of adulthood (late 20s, mid-40s, and late 50s). This was something that I did not give a lot of thought to as I was preparing for this study, yet it made me think that where one sits on this continuum does raise different kinds of questions about choice. These three participants are also whom I spent the longest amount of time talking with over the course of a year or longer. They are Don, Heaven, and Gervais (all participants names are pseudonyms).

Every person interviewed in this study shared an interesting story of why and how they arrived at Pyramid Career School, which made it difficult to for me to select which stories to tell more fully. In the end, I chose to profile Don, Heaven, and Gervais’s stories
because they agreed to remain accessible as I analyzed and wrote about their stories. Others were typically gracious in responding to my inquiries when I reached out to them as well.

Each person’s story begins with a prologue that describes the circumstances surrounding my engagement with each of them, which includes my reflections of the interviews, relational information, and so forth. Following these three case chapters, Chapter 7 presents an overview of my findings across all seven participants’ stories of postsecondary choice, where I include the voices of the other participants. In relation to my research questions below, Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 answer research questions 1, 1a, 1b, and in part, 2a. Chapter 8, the final data chapter, examines the languaging of for-profit education, and responds to research questions 2, 2a, and 2b.

**Research Questions:**

1. As college choice has been described as a complex developmental process that takes shape over the course of one’s lifespan, what does this experience look like for adult students, who opt to attend a less-than-2-year, non-degree granting, for-profit institution?
   a) What factors mediated students’ decisions to attend a for-profit institution rather than a non-profit institution offering similar educational programs?
   b) What resources do students attending a for-profit institution draw upon in their postsecondary choice process?

2. In the Philadelphia region, how do adults experience the discoursing of for-profit education?
a) How do participants read their institutional type (Pyramid Career School) among other institutional types (e.g., community colleges and not-for-profit 4-year colleges)?

b) As a for-profit institution, how does Pyramid Career School portray itself to the world?

Lastly, as stated earlier in this report, I refer to “college choice” as postsecondary choice to reflect the larger landscape of options available post high school or GED completion. In the context of this study, the word “college,” is ill-fitting as Pyramid Career School is a non-degree granting institution.
CHAPTER FOUR

DON’S STORY: THE JOURNEY TO SELF-ACTUALIZATION

So one day, I was like uhm. I got favor, I got power, I got God. I got this-that. I said but I want, (0.2) I wanna, I don't wanna just make it. I wanna get beyond just makin' it. I don't just want to BE happy. I wanna be Hap-PY. (0.3) You know? I said there's more--I said there's more out there for me, I'm a get it. I said I don't care what age I'm at now. I'm not gonna stop. I'm gonna get it. I said I got all these (0.2) ideas. I tell people stuff will work for them. I said it's gotta work for me too. (Don, Interview 2, 4/3/14)

Prologue

On March 31, 2014, I conducted my first interview for this project with Don, a 57-year-old, African American gentleman, who was a divorcée with no children. When I met him, he was about three months into the medical assistant program at Pyramid Career School and collecting unemployment benefits. After briefly discussing the consent form and contact sheet with Don, I began the interview as I did with all the participants, asking each to explain the circumstances that led up to the decision to enroll in school, and Pyramid in particular. Don’s postsecondary choice narrative is somewhat complex in that involves the mapping of two separate attempts to enroll in school within a three-year period. I discuss both attempts in this chapter as I think it is necessary for readers to understand the assertions I make about his entry into Pyramid.

Prior to the first interview, I spoke with Don briefly on the phone about my project after the admissions representative, Jordan, confirmed that Don would assist me with my study. I recall feeling ecstatic about my first interview, as negotiating access to a research site had become a long and challenging journey. Upon my first visit to Pyramid Career School, Jordan made the in-person introduction, and then led Don and me to an empty classroom where I could conduct the interview.
Don was very polite and quiet at first. Behaving as many people do in the situation of meeting someone new, he employed a formal register in responding to me (e.g., saying yes instead of yeah). Nonetheless, he appeared comfortable throughout the interviews and was generous in sharing the details of his life. From my estimation, the words he spoke were his genuine thoughts. Narrative scholars talk about the makings of a good, believable story. Much of this often hinges on the rhetorical skills of the researcher responsible for assembling participants’ stories into some logical and cohesive manner (Riessman, 2008; Seidman, 2006), but even before that the informant’s delivery is also very important (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011). My evaluation of Don’s account is based on the vulnerability and reflexivity demonstrated in his storytelling, as well as the consistency of his thinking throughout our interactions.

At most of my interviews, I dressed neatly but casually (e.g., Lands’ End shirt and cardigan with corduroy pants and sometimes jeans, simple silver stud earrings, a wrist watch, and a silver necklace with a Blessed Mother pendant attached). By the end of the second interview, Don revealed, however, that he perceived me to be someone important despite my efforts to conduct the interviews in a very relaxed and conversational manner. As I was preparing to show him a PowerPoint of pictures I had taken around the region of postsecondary advertisements, he uttered: “Oh, you big time. I knew it.” (Don, interview 2 - Line 1733, 4-3-14), followed by “Mm! I’m a come work for you. (0.5) Whew! She, she got me all excited. (laughs)” (Line 1739). He thought that I had created the advertisements I was showing him for his response in a photo elicitation activity
(Creswell, 2007, p. 129), which I did not. Nonetheless, the comment provided an important clue to how I was being perceived in this research relationship.

I had my own perceptions of Don, too, whom I discovered to be a very spiritual man. After completing the second interview, I recorded the following in my research journal as I was documenting preliminary thoughts about what I had learned from him:

Don is an affable guy. He has a good awareness of himself and the outer world. Despite a difficult childhood, he appears to be a pleasant man, not bitter or angry at all. He is even forgiving and understanding toward his parents—hardly has a bitter word to speak towards them. He is an understanding and compassionate person, indeed. He was raised with minimal direction, yet is here today testifying about the glory of God. It is through faith that he has overcome so much adversity. (A. Flack, Journal Entry, 4/4/14)

What will follow in this chapter is a re-narration of Don’s postsecondary choice experience that is constructed around themes that emerged from the interviews I conducted with Don on March 31, April 3 and November 2. During the interviews I asked lots of clarifying questions and also repeated questions at different times to achieve the most accurate account possible. Through Don’s own admission, this process was facilitative in aiding his recall. Although narrative research is not so much concerned with obtaining an exact account of what happened (Riessman, 2008), but rather how people make sense of their experiences, I believe that some of these details were indeed important to interpreting Don’s experience. For instance, his use of the Internet for information illuminated an important site worthy of closer examination. I will return to this theme a bit later in my discussion of the data, but first I will simply present his story as I understand it using an assemblage of excerpts obtained from 66 pages of interview
transcript, journal entries, and information obtained from a Qualtrics survey to guide my analysis and interpretation.

“Theories and theorists may serve as lenses for inquiry” (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2001, p. 81). As I have stated all along, the college choice modeling work of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Perna (2006, 2013) have been informative to my analysis of participants’ stories in that they have guided much of what I pay attention to. Likewise, in this particular chapter, Schaafsma and Vinz’s (2011) strategy for “provisional decision making on focus and focalization” based on the constructs of salience, emphasis, and incompleteness, has also been integral to my analysis and construction of Don’s story.

“…I got tired of being burnt.”

Don’s postsecondary choice journey occurred in two phases: the first time in 2010 and most recently in fall 2013. And although he did not make the first of his recent attempts to enroll in school until 2010, the impetus of Don’s postsecondary choice journey actually occurred in 2008 when he was laid off from a contracted security position with the Philadelphia Airport that he really enjoyed. Don reported that since that time, he experienced a difficult time finding consistent and decent-paying work as a security officer, which ultimately led to his interest in enrolling in school. In the following excerpt, Don describes the circumstances informing his decision to enroll at Pyramid Career School as follows.
Excerpt 1:

A: Can you start just by telling me like (0.2) what brought you back to school? Like what were the events that (0.3) brought you back (0.2) to school (0.2) in the first place?

D: Well, what brought me back, I-I was doing security since 1986

A: Hm-mm

D: Uhm, some jobs pay well, some jobs don't. But (0.2) the job I had was uhm (0.5) They (0.3) they would send me to different accounts but they would lower the pay rate.

A: Mm-hm

D: You know, and uhm (0.4) Uh:I always liked the medical field anyway, so a couple people was--they was nurses I said (0.3) I always wanted to be a nurse or doctor anyway

A: Mm-hm

D: So uhm, (0.2) and had a friend who was a (0.3) cancer patient. She said you would make great doctor the way you take care of me. You know, I said one day I might just do that (0.2) you know.

A: Yeah

D: But, but uhm, I got tired of being burnt you know in the security field, and so I went online (0.2) lookin’ up nursin' programs

A: Mm-hm

(Don, Interview 1, Lines 11-27, 3/31/14)

Although the excerpt references Don’s most recent attempt to enter school in 2013, readers should note that this was actually his second attempt to enter a postsecondary program of study, and that attempt one was very influential in how he
proceeded in attempt two. Second, in analyzing the explanation Don provides at the beginning of Interview 1, three important factors immediately come to surface that are central to understanding Don’s decision making process going forward. The first of which is the role the Internet played in his search process. The second theme pertains to Don’s level of frustration with the job market and his general desire to get ahead in life, which served as a strong motivating force in his decision-making. The third element hints at important readings of the world he experienced, which helped him in ascertaining a career direction that subsequently influenced his overall postsecondary choice process. What is hidden in the excerpt above, however, is how Don first became familiar with finding information about educational programs online, which I found significant to his choice process. As I was trying to ascertain a timeline and summary of the institutions he looked at in his choice process, Don clarified for me, in a moment of self-correction, the circumstances that led him to seriously pursuing school.

Excerpt 2: Some of them trick you

A: So how [long ago was that?] (referencing Don’s consideration of University of Phoenix)

D: [ That was 10-10 ]

A: How long ago

D: 2010

A: That was 2010?

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Readers should note that although I refer to Don’s most recent attempts to enter school as one and two, he actually completed a postsecondary diploma program in security in 1986. Hence my number referencing pertains to his most recent interest in entering school.
D: Yeah.
A: Oh!
D: I remember it because I was in the uhm hospital.
A: Okay.
D: Mm-hm. (0.4) And you know, I couldn't (0.3) you know you asked me the other day. I said I did start but I didn't remember what ignited it, but that's what it was. (0.2) Cause I was going online and every time you uhh go online for jobs, some of them trick you. And it, the schools come up with all these questions.
A: Really?
D: And then they kept on calling me like 100 times. (mimics the calls) I got--then they kept sendin' me letters--and Oh! Strayer. I was about to go to Strayer also. The one--
A: So was Strayer the second one.
D: Yeah, [provides campus location]. Yeah.

(Don, interview 2 – Lines 1062-1079, 4-3-14)

As described above, it was through the course of job searching on the Internet in 2010 that Don inadvertently stumbled upon a recruitment website, which was masked as a job lead, that led him to seriously considering the possibility of enrolling in school to improve his employability. Additionally informed by his reading of many others’ success in the healthcare industry and the positive encouragement he received for helping his sick friend years earlier, Don had begun to seriously entertain the idea of becoming a healthcare worker. His attempt to enter the University of Phoenix and Strayer University, however, was unsuccessful due to a defaulted student loan from years earlier, when he
completed a diploma program in security during the 1980s at a small for-profit school in Philadelphia. Without financial aid, the cost to study at either institution was prohibitive.

Don’s aspirations were quieted momentarily. He continued to take security assignments when they became available. He also worked at a restaurant on the side to make ends meet. He described really struggling during this time, which mounted his frustration and desire to make a change in his life if given the opportunity to do so.

Encouraged by the accounts of several people in his social sphere, Don continued to think about ways to enter the healthcare industry, which is rather robust throughout the Philadelphia region. The following excerpt is demonstrative of the many influences informing his desire to pursue a career in healthcare, and sets the stage for his second attempt to enroll in school.

*Except 3: They trainin’ him for free*

A: So:., you have sort of like an informal network.

D: [Yeah!]

A: People [ talk ]. It’s just like they say in [ advertising, people who--yeah ]

D: [Yeah, a lot of people. Yeah, I ask.] I see people with their uniforms on goin' to school, goin' to hospitals, hospitals training them. I, I have a friend, ah we used to go to church together, his name is Donte, he uhm, he got a job in a hospital. He worked, worked from the uhm: (0.2) food service all the way up to uhm, what is it? Uhm::: Op, what is the operation room.

A: Mm-hm

D: Pre---he said, pre-op--

A: (interjects) He does all the prep stuff.
D: Yeah, (0.2) and he been there for a couple years. But he went all the way to the top already. They trainin' him for free.

A: Oh really?!

D: The hospital. (0.4) Yeah, the hospital was trainin' him. (0.2) He went from, from ah cookin' and preppin' (chuckles) the kitchen to orderly, a orderly, up to the operation ah, pre-, post-operation--whatever you call it. Yep! (0.4) He doing good. (0.4) Happy, never sad. Always cool, calm, collective.

A: So it sounds like you know, you're really paying attention to the world around you.

D: Yeah.

A: It's not people giving you literature and sayin' "You should do thi:s." or

D: Mm-mmm

(Don, Interview 2, Lines 475-494, 4/3/14)

In my analysis of the excerpt above, a noteworthy theme emerges about Don’s frame of mind that was reiterated at many other points in the interviews. Don underscores how Donte is “doing good” and that he is “happy, never sad. Always cool, calm, collective.” In a subtle way, Don references the contrast of his reality with that of Donte’s seemingly good life and perceived lack of hardship. Further, the fact that both men had backgrounds in food service undoubtedly contributed to Don’s reading that a job in healthcare was indeed an achievable path for himself (Bandura, 1997; Ormrod, 2008). Donte’s pathway also plants a seed in Don’s mind about overcoming the financial barrier he faced in getting trained for a new career. Although Don’s thinking was greatly informed by Donte’s experience, he reported that his most recent attempt to pursue school again in 2013 was actually ignited by a chance conversation on the bus that he had
with another former church member who shared that her children had completed a *free* program through the District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund to entering some aspect of nursing.

District 1199C is a Philadelphia-based consortium of healthcare union members, hospitals, other healthcare facilities and agencies that promote and train people to enter the region’s sizeable healthcare industry. Although it was not clear what level of nursing the “free” program pertained to (e.g., CNA, LPN, RN)\(^7\), Don’s acquaintance on the bus said that the program allowed her children immediate access to perceivably good jobs in the city. With this information in mind, Don applied to take the new learner assessment offered by District 1199C in hopes of getting admitted to the same or a similar program. He stated that he never heard back from District 1199C and assumed that he was rejected admission to the program because of his performance on the assessment. Despite this, Don remained steadfast in his pursuit of a career in healthcare, as indicated in *Excerpt 4* below, for he truly believed that it would not only transform his quality of life but also serve as a way for him to actualize his potential, which also became a persistent theme throughout the interviews.

*Excerpt 4*

D: And I said, I said listen I ain't lettin this stop. They ain't even respond to me, I don't even care. I'm a still get it. (0.3) Yep! It was still in the back of my head.

(Don, Interview 2, 4-1-14, Lines 421-422)

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\(^7\) I have noticed that many people apply the term nurse or nursing to various levels of nursing care. Hence I wanted to make note that it was unclear which level of nursing the 1199C program actually pertained to.
Don credits the bus conversation as what inspired his most recent attempt to pursue school. Informed with idea that he might be able to acquire a free education by two peers, and having experienced a failed attempt to get into District 1199C’s program, Don moved his search for other potentially “free” or affordable training programs onto the Internet using the terms “free or low budget nursing programs.” Armed with what he had learned through his experience with Strayer and Phoenix—that the cost of education was expensive and completely unaffordable without aid—it became clear to me that Don put great faith in his Google search results in locating programs appropriate to his budget constraints. In the next two excerpts presented, I provide evidence to support this assertion. Don’s search terms, however, yielded everything but free or low-cost training for careers in nursing. One of the first programs that caught his attention was Pyramid Career School.

“Excerpt 5: I could Google anything!”

D: And uhm (0.2) ahh, (0.2) as far as school's concerned (0.2) I went on uhm (0.3) Google (0.3) Google, so I could Google anything I wanted and typed up (0.3) uhh low budget nursing programs or free nursing programs, and Pyramid came up I guess as a school with lower prices than (0.2) other schools, you know. But in comparison, everybody's different. But uh, (0.3) the price was cool, and I was approved for it.

A: mm-hm

D: And uhm:

A: So what is--can I ask what's the tuition like what's the charge for your program?

D: It was uh (0.2) they said, what they say ah, (0.3) what's 18? 18,000 (0.2) but after I got approved
A: mm-hm

D: it was down to about 9 or 8 thousand.

A: Okay.

D: Yeah.

A: So they

D: After the grants and the loans and stuff.

A: So they were able to give you grants and loans?

D: Yes.

A: Okay, so 18,000 (speaking while I record on my paper tablet)

D: mm-hmm

A: Down to 8-9?

D: So that's only like half and uh, you can pay uhm: 80 a month (0.3) 80 a month towards the loan or pay when you finish school

A: mm-hm

D: So I got the option to--I don't have to pay nothin' until after I finish

A: Okay, usually it's [six months] after

D: --(interrupts) [next year ] Yeah, right. He said a year, so.

(Don, Interview 2, lines 25-49, 4/3/14)

In the Excerpt 5, a few important factors are illuminated. The first is how Don navigated his way to a perceivably inexpensive or free program using the search terms “low budget” and “free.” Secondly, although the Pyramid’s programs were not “free” or “low budget,” as his Internet search results suggested, Pyramid wound up being the first instance in which Don was deemed eligible for financial aid again. Hence allowing him a
way to pay for the training he desired. Excerpt 6 that follows further underscores that Don’s eligibility for financial aid was indeed a critical factor in his decision to enroll at Pyramid, as he was very cognizant of his inability to pay out of pocket. It also highlights the faith he had in his search results.

_Excerpt 6: It was a miracle:_

A: So, what was the fallout with Strayer.

D: Uh, same thing, the money.

A: Okay.

D: Mm-hm. (0.2) And that loan. (0.4) That loan stop a lot of people.

A: So, did it. So the loan is cleared up enough where you could do here?

D: Yes.

A: Okay.

D: _That was a miracle itself._ I was, I was surprised myself, but (0.2) I had paid on it a lot on it from the income taxes. (0.3) _I didn't realize it, but this first, that's why the first time I got uhm (0.2) approved and uhm (0.2) set-up to pay the rest of it off. Which isn't much, so._

(Don, Interview 2- Lines 1100-1109, 4/3/14)

One of Pyramid’s strengths was the way in which it packaged the cost of programs in a manner that was very affordable. This was a consistent theme across participants. No one really balked at the price, but instead, they matter-of-factly talked about paying $80 per month. What also becomes apparent in _Excerpt 5_ is that Don had become aware that less expensive options existed. He explained later how this came about once people at his church tried to dissuade his enrollment plans after he had matriculated into Pyramid. Don, however, expressed that he was not concerned about the
cost difference as he felt well served in his experience at Pyramid. From his standpoint, Pyramid offered excellent instructors and real potential for him to get a job afterwards. More importantly, he felt that that this feedback came from people who were not well intentioned—a point that I will return to later. In reality, he probably would not have been able to withdraw from Pyramid without suffering a significant loss as students pay for the entire program up front and are given a short window period in which to withdraw. Aside from all of this, through a third-party source, Don was aware of Pyramid graduates actually getting hired. He also interacted with recently placed Pyramid students who provided him with advice on landing and keeping a job. Those students who were not successful were perceived to be the cause of their own problems, rather than a result of anything Pyramid may have done or failed to do in preparing them for work.

The Application Process

Prior to actually matriculating at Pyramid, Don described having a very positive interaction with Pyramid’s admissions staff. Following up his Internet lead, Don proceeded to take a closer look at the school, which was located at somewhat of a distance from where he lived (i.e., in a neighboring state). As he was waiting in the lobby to meet the representative, he overheard a woman talking about her son attending a location in Pennsylvania. Don stated that he did not know that there was in fact a branch in Pennsylvania, and subsequently asked to be considered for that campus instead. The school arranged for him to meet an admission representative at the other location later that evening. Although the site he attended was within the state of Pennsylvania, it was still a very long daily commute for Don, which he did using Philadelphia’s extensive
public transportation system. Distance is an often-cited issue in choice literature (Bergerson, 2009; Freeman, 2005; Paulsen, 1990), and especially in the context of for-profit education (e.g., Cellini, 2005; Chung, 2009). I highlight Don’s willingness to travel so far for a program to show the intensity of his desires to enroll in school.

Don reported really liking what Pyramid had to offer, highlighting that Jordan, his admissions representative, was very good about letting him decide a course of direction for himself rather than pressuring him into a program he was not interested in, as this was the case with Strayer. Don expressly wanted to enter a program that would lead to a job in health care, but when dealing with Strayer, he was encouraged to pursue a program in homeland security—training which he felt he could get for free if he simply applied for a TSA position at the airport. Such awareness showed that Don was capable of critically evaluating his options when he had the appropriate background knowledge. The excerpt below provides a glimpse of Don’s admissions experience in his own words.

*Excerpt 7: His whole focus is what you want*

A: What was it like for your application process?

D: Uhh, it was uhm (0.4) What did we have to do? (0.3) It was more of the uhh. (0.3) They would ask you what fields you think that would fit you the best.

A: Mm-hm

D: Cause they show you all the programs that’s here. Uhm, (0.2) and uhm but Jordan, he was, he was low-key (0.2) uh: Just let you sit there and be yourself and uhm then he would counter, counter (0.2) answer according what, you know, what, what you want. >His, his whole focus is what you want.< Or what you think is best for you.

A: Yeah.

(Don, Interview 1, Lines 1314-1322, 3-31-14)
The excerpt above demonstrates the career counseling and guidance role that admissions representatives provided to students, which I found to be a very important role in participants’ lives as they were actively figuring out their next steps. Admissions representatives at the school were also very cognizant of their role in this regard, too, as I learned through my conversations with them about the audience they perceived Pyramid primarily serving: people needing a second chance or people needing to get on their feet. Either way, they surmounted the school offered people a new beginning (Eden, personal communication, 4/19/14; Fermina, personal communication, 4/19/14; Jordan; personal communication, 6/25/14). In addition to the interview with Jordan, Don reported having to go through a simple admissions process that included taking a brief assessment (i.e., the Wonderlic Cognitive Ability Test), completing a short application, providing proof of graduating high school, and undergoing a background check. After being approved for financial aid, Don was scheduled to begin classes in the following month, as Pyramid operated on a rolling admissions schedule. As long as there were enough students to fill a class, a new module began each month.

Choice: The Convergence of Many Forces

Excerpt 8: Divine Intervention—It’s my time!

D: (chuckles) (0.3) So uhm: (0.3) I believe that (0.3) people's destiny it comes sometime without them even knowing it. You know you can walk in the door and your whole life can change and just go upward. Or somebody discover you. I-I just ah: (0.2) I just believe it's my time, that's all. That's all I believe. I-I feel totally different since I got into this. I feel like another person. I don't feel like the old Don anymore. You know, I-I've developed mannerisms of a doctor and--or a physician (chuckles).

(Don, Interview 1, 1228-1232, 3-31-14)
Leading up to this section, I have highlighted a number of elements along the way that contributed to Don’s matriculation into Pyramid Career School. The first factor pertained to the economy, which presented a challenge for him to earn a living doing what he had always done: safety and security work. And although he worked in a restaurant for many years, this was not his primary source of income. Second, and closely tied to factors one and three, Don’s desire for self-actualization served as a strong motivating force in his journey into postsecondary education as he felt unfulfilled. Third, he was actively reading the experience of others around him in terms of gauging his career move (i.e., saw others as a source of inspiration and as a blueprint for his own trajectory of what was possible). Fourth, the timing of this opportunity amidst a succession of rejections and an urgent desire to get a job in healthcare seems have to played critical role in Don’s choice (e.g., the notion of divine intervention; access to financial aid; admitted to and able to actually attend school). And lastly, Don’s decision making in isolation and his use of the Internet as a primary source for information was very influential in shaping his options. It appears to have created a bit of tunnel vision in his decision-making. In sum, his story suggests that Don took the first opportunity available for divine intervention appeared to have made a way for him to pursue his dreams.

In the remainder of this section, I will discuss in more detail the five factors that I just highlighted above and how I see them working together to facilitate Don’s entry into Pyramid. In doing, so readers will be directed to review excerpt passages provided throughout this chapter to follow my arguments about Don’s choice process. A noticeable
absence thus far in Don’s story has been a discussion about school type (i.e., for-profit), which is a central focus of this research. I will discuss Don’s thinking on this subject in Chapter 8.

**Five Emerging Themes Guiding Don’s Postsecondary Choice**

**The Economy and Other Contextual Factors.** The genesis of Don’s decision to enroll in school lies squarely within the context of a rapidly changing economy. The onset of the Great Recession in 2007 has been well documented as yielding devastating effects to many workers across the United States and abroad (Perna, 2013; Van Horn, 2013). Don reported losing his job with the Philadelphia Airport in 2008 during the height of the economic crisis in the U.S. Like many adult workers displaced during this time, he experienced an excruciating time trying to replace the wages and hours his former employer offered (Van Horn, 2013). The enactment of the Affordable Care Act also very likely exacerbated Don’s employment options as many employers reduced employees’ work hours to avoid having to pay for their healthcare. Hence this finding aligns with the fourth layer of Perna’s (2013) proposed conceptual model of college choice, which calls attention to the social, economic, and policy context surrounding students’ educational decision making. Although, there is a difference of institutional type, this finding is consistent with Paulsen’s (1990) earlier review of college choice scholarship, which underscored the influence of a poor economy as influential to individuals’ decisions to pursue “college.” Per Paulsen (1990), had the economy not been in such a dire state, it seems reasonable to conclude that Don would have very well continued in the line of work he was in, particularly since he really enjoyed his job. Don
spent over two decades working in security, which would perceptively make him more experienced and eligible for higher wages—especially since he also acquired formal training for this line of work.

Not being able to find a new job in security that provided a consistent livable wage made it necessary for Don to consider retraining for something else. Although Don did not specifically discuss concerns about how his age may factor in the job market, another participant, Mack, expressed deep suspicions about how age impacted his own employability as an EMT worker, and even the impact age might have on his future as a medical assistant. Unbeknownst to Don, age discrimination may have also factored into his employability and subsequent need for retraining in a more age-friendly profession.

As I think about Don’s circumstances, this was not a small undertaking, nor a decision made lightly. As Van Horn (2013) notes, many displaced workers never consider retraining for a new job (p. 85). They often hold out thinking that something will eventually come their way, when such possibilities are highly unlikely. Van Horn (2013) highlights that the success of workers in contemporary America will largely depend on their ability to be nimble about retraining (p. 37), further citing that “In order to keep up with a rapidly changing labor market, American workers will need education and training frequently during their careers” (Van Horn, 2013, p. 37). In this regard, Doc’s mindset puts him at an advantage.
**Self-Actualization**. As stated earlier, it is important to note that throughout our conversations Don was very reflective about not having lived up to his full potential and the barriers that contributed to this situation. Don shared that he had come through a challenging childhood marred by the displacement of him and his siblings from the guidance of their parents. In such a milieu, he recognizes that he and his siblings were handicapped in not receiving guidance in cultivating the many talents that have come to light over the course of their adult lives. He discussed a lifetime of struggle, feeling that some mystical force had been working against him and his siblings in actualizing their potential in life (see *Excerpt 14*).

As I reviewed the whole of each participant’s postsecondary choice experience, I usually noted some strong overarching theme that could aptly frame their choice experience. Later in my reading, Riessman (2008) helped me make sense of my noticings. Entering school at the age of 57 is a rather significant undertaking. And although it is clear that there were compelling economic reasons that initially inspired this decision, Don’s engagement in school was motivated and sustained by so much more. As I carefully analyzed what he had to say in the interviews, it was clear that Don was fulfilling a personal goal to achieve something meaningful in his life. He largely viewed himself as standing still and not making progress in life amongst many others he knew in his social sphere. His reflection on the appreciation that many customers whom he served at a restaurant he has worked at for over 25 years seemed to be one of few

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8 My reference to self-actualization does not exactly map onto Abraham Maslow’s theory of motivation, commonly referred to as Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1987; Ormrod, 2008). However, a parallel exists in what Maslow (1987) describes as the need to self-actualize as a desire to become all that one is capable of becoming, which is suggested in Don’s interview transcripts.
accomplishments he felt able to claim. Completing a program at Pyramid and being able to pursue a good job in the medical field held the promise of making him feel more accomplished in life. Recognizing the multitude of talent within his family that went virtually unused, the circumstances were ripe for him to take a chance at pursuing the limits of his potential (Paulsen, 1990).

Don’s desire for self-actualization was based on excerpts such as the following three (i.e., Excerpts 9, 10, and 11), which are representative of many instances where Don discussed wanting to “do better.”

*Excerpt 9: They not lookin’ down, but…*

D: Ain't nothi'n' wrong with me, I'm gon get out of this. (claps hands) I'm gonna do this. (claps hands) I got people in church lookin' up to me, but they wish that I was doin' better. They not lookin' down, but they wish, you know what I'm sayin'? A: Mm-hm.

D: It's hard, it's hard bein' a leader and you, you got your stuff goin' but you don't. And you strugglin', but it's good for people to see that you're strugglin' because it's, they gon see you come up and come out, and they remember where you was.

(Don, Interview 2, Lines 1132-1138, 4-3-14)

*Excerpt 10: Having something to show*

D: So, so that's one of my uh:: (0.2) One of the things that ignited all this is I want to do better. I wanna be better. (0.3) I wanna not just say it, but have something to show--not to show off, but to--that I have it. (Don, Interview 2, Lines 752-754, 4-3-14)
Excerpt 11: Don shares the good news about enrolling at Pyramid

D: And him and his wife, they push me. They push me. You know. >Keep on, keep on.< And then, one day I said. I said it in church. (chuckled) They--I thought I was the president or somethin' (chuckles) (0.3) Everybody started clapping, and their eyes were like "Oh my God!" 4.0 Wow! Now they lookin’ at me in a total different way. Like (0.2) and uhm, we had learned all these new words, new vocabulary as far as the medical field is concerned, and so my vocabulary changed. The way I talk, I talk to people. Like I'm a doctor myself, you know and. Just cool, calm and collected, but full of information. mm-hm.

A: That is great.

D: And I-I feel that uhm, that this is--this is me. It's not (0.2) just [unclear], that's my goal to be (0.2) a doctor or be the best (0.2) that I can be as far as medical field's concerned.

(Don, Interview 1, Lines 860-868, 3-31-14)

As self-actualization pertains to motivation, I frame this finding to be an important predisposition factor in Don’s postsecondary choice experience (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987).

Self-Efficacy: Reading the Examples of Others. In my conversations with not only my research participants, but people whom I have met along the way as I have been engaged in this research, there exists a significant level of discomfort for many adults when it comes to learning in the context of formal education. Some people just do not feel that there is room in their lives to return to school. Others have a dis-ease about having to pursue formalized classroom training and education because of earlier unsuccessful life experiences as learners, or they simply assume that their academic skills are too rusty. In Don’s case, it helped that he had access to messages promoting education in his church community, which was an integral part of his life. As described in
my storying of his experience, many of the influences he noted were from people he knew from various church communities throughout his life.

A recurrent pattern in the transcripts was Don’s readings of the experiences of those around him. The act of reading his social environment regarding a direction for his life is in Freirian terms, a way of knowing (Freire, 1970). There were several points where he reflected about others in relation to himself—where they were vs. where he was, and the fact that these individuals were similar to himself. This identification appeared to be integral in determining what he thought was possible of his own life. For a long time now, scholars have underscored the significance of role models’ influence of our aspirations (Ormrod, 2008). In the case of his church friend, Donte (refer to Excerpt 3), it was clear that Don used him as a model for his own aspirations (amongst others, too). Albert Bandura’s (1986) notion of self-efficacy offers a theoretical premise on which to base my reading of how Don approached his career and educational plans. Self-efficacy pertains to an individual’s perception of their ability to successfully perform a behavior (Ormrod, 2008, p. 135). Those with high self-efficacy are deemed confident about their chances of achieving a positive outcome. Those who have low self-efficacy are deemed less confident about their ability to perform a particular behavior.

Despite his positive assessment of himself in relation to others, Don admitted to having some trepidation about school. The excerpt below is one of several instances indicative of this outlook. Yet he also demonstrated a courageous attitude that was forged in a developing a belief about his own plentitude of untapped gifts and talents (see Excerpts 13 and 14).
Excerpt 12: I'm gon do what I gotta do

D: It's like things with jobs. Situations. Mone::y. (0.2) (claps hands) I said, Lord, I'm gettin', Ugh! Of--even uhm, uhm: (0.3) uh, let's see, July, like by the month of July like. Like my money shriveled up, they would downsize, or lay me off or somethin'. Or some dumb reason. I said I'm tired of this mess, ma::n. Yep.

A: And the lightbulb went off.

D: mm-hm

A: Good for you.

D: Yeah, I got tired of it. I said, whatever I gotta do, I'm a do it. God gon help me, cause he said he would. So, I'm gon do what I gotta do, and just believe him. I said, I don't even care.

(Don, Interview 2, Lines 1309-1316, 4-3-14)

Further, regardless of his age and circumstances, Don had the belief that “it was not too late” to improve his life and that his destiny was in fact achievable due to his inherent talents and God’s help. In part, the theme of self-efficacy relates to Hossler and Gallagher’s predisposition phase and the core of Perna’s model emphasizing individuals’ personal assessments of their academic achievement and preparation. Similarly, it relates to Bourdieu’s notion of habitus—“a set of dispositions through which the world is perceived, understood, and evaluated” (Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt, & Moll, 2011, p. 166), which is also a construct referenced in Perna’s (2006, 2013) conceptual model.

**Timing. Choice,** as revealed in this circumstance, greatly depended on the programs Don could pay for and be admitted to. After several unsuccessful attempts to enroll in school, Don finally heard “yes” and appears to have quickly acted on the first opportunity that became available to him. The timing of his application to Pyramid
coincided with his renewed eligibility for student financial aid, which he appears to associate with God making things happen on his behalf as part of his larger destiny. Hence the need to shop for other schools became a moot issue as he expressed feeling very satisfied with what Pyramid said they could offer him: entry to a healthcare job, an affordable program, and short-term training.

Don’s comfort with Pyramid was largely achieved through his interaction with Jordan during the admissions process. Don’s reading of Jordan as being a positive facilitator in his decision-making was appreciated in contrast to what he experienced earlier with Strayer University. It also underscores the significance of relationship building that occurs during the search phase on the institution’s side, and what I perceive as the psychology admissions representatives employed to facilitate students’ comfort with the school. Having been trained in a counselor education program myself, what Don describes in *Excerpt 7* seems very emblematic of an approach a guidance counselor would use with clients.

Another dimension of time or “timing” pertains to his age and general life circumstances. Don needed to begin a program quickly in order to improve his quality of life as soon as possible. At Pyramid, he could be done and back to work within 12 months. Hence this route appeared quite attractive from all angles. Further, in regard to his long-term aspirations, Don viewed Pyramid as mainly providing him with a foot in the door opportunity, which he intended to build upon with more schooling and work experience. As I interviewed subsequent participants, this seemed to be a shared
perspective. Pyramid merely represented a first step to which participants could further build their futures.

**Information & Guidance.** “I didn’t know a lot of things” (Don, Interview 2, 4-3-14). The lack of information and guidance was a significant theme in our discussion of Don’s life trajectory as information about postsecondary education and careers was not readily available to him while growing up. As we discussed his journey into Pyramid and how much he was unexpectedly enjoying his learning experience, Don lamented about not pursuing a career in healthcare much sooner. From Don’s assessment, had he had access to the Internet earlier, he would have attempted a career in healthcare much sooner because he always had a fascination with how the body worked. Although I question whether he would have returned to school had he maintain his job at the Philadelphia Airport—as losing that job appears to have triggered the need to find other work—such an assertion underscores the paucity of information and resources Don believed he had access to in making important career and education decisions. In this section, I will discuss Don’s access and use of information and resources in making decisions about postsecondary education. This discussion is organized around three particular subthemes that emerged in my analysis of the data: family and school influences; indirect role models and networking; and decision making in isolation with the help of the Internet.

**Family & School.** Don described himself as a lifelong resident of the city of Philadelphia. He was born and raised in North Philadelphia, and graduated from the Philadelphia public school system. In discussing his upbringing he described his childhood as a disruptive due to his parents’ volatile relationship, which resulted in him
and his siblings being scattered amongst various family members for several years. As the middle child of 9 children in the family, he spoke with sadness and regret in his voice about his and his siblings’ wasted potential as a result of not being properly mentored by his parents. He remarked that at times he and his siblings had to either raise themselves or sometimes one another. Despite this hardship, he never spoke condemningly of either parent, to which I attributed to his strong Christian beliefs. He stated wistfully that they did the best that they could. Nonetheless, Don cited that the outcome of such tumultuous circumstances was that he and his siblings were derailed from using their many natural, God-given talents. In making sense of what he perceived to be a lack of progress in his life, Don expressed the lack of mentoring from his father as especially salient. The following excerpt was one of several instantiations of this theme. It is taken from Interview 2, and emanated from an offshoot discussion we were having about the downfall of professional athletes:

Excerpt 13: “If”

D: Mm-hmm. Cause he [Allen Iverson] had no mentors. (0.2) No father image. Nobody didn't tell you if (0.3) That's why I believe if my dad would've took time and talked to us, you know, I think things would be different.

A: Mm-hm.

D: Cause, he was, he had a high IQ. He was smart. Wasn't nothin' slow about him. Wasn't nothin' slow about my mom either, you know.

A: mm-hm

D: Everybody end up (0.2) different parts of the family was doctors, lawyers, dis, dat, whatever, you know.

A: mm-hm
D: All in high positions on both sides of the family.

A: REally?!

D: Yeah.

A: Did you have a lot of contact with the, the rest of the family?

D: Mm-hm. (0.2) Yeah. They always, always looked up to me. Always, grandmother, she say, you gon be somethin' when you grow up.

A: Aw:::h

D: You know. She always said that. (0.4) Everybody saw somethin' that I didn't see, you know. But it's never too late. Sometimes you don't know.

A: mm-hm

(Don, Interview 2, Lines 612-628, 4/3/14)

A second Excerpt (#14) bore a similar theme:

Excerpt 14: “My father wasn’t there...”

D: I said it's it's like it seems like somethin' holdin' us [siblings] back. I'm a get out of this whatever it is.

A: Mm-hmm

D: You know, I said, I kept pushin', you know. So, whatever I did I became the best--excelled to the top. Most, most of my managers and (0.2) ah some teachers was a little intimidated by me, you know.

A: Really?

D: Yeah. (0.3) Thought I was comin' to take over. A lot of jobs wouldn't accept me, thought I was too cocky or too over-experienced. [whispers] Please.

A: Whatever! Keep it movin'.

D: Yeah. But the leader was in me, you know.

A: Yeah, you're gifted.
D: I didn't try to be a leader. It was just there. You know, I didn't. Maybe because my father wasn't there, so most people become what (0.2) uh: they didn't get from their parents.

A: Hmm.

D: So. (0.3) I (chuckles) be tryin' to take the class over sometime. I just shut -up. My teacher, she be mad.

(Don, Interview 2, Lines 691-704, 4/3/14)

Generally, Don cited having a dearth of support from his immediate family, something that deeply saddened him. Despite having “successful” people in his extended family, they did not appear to be a resource to which he could utilize in his career and educational planning. Further, in taking a cue from Schaafsma and Vinz’s (2011) analytical framework regarding “silences,” there was little mention of Don having much contact with his siblings. This reading is confirmed through Excerpt 15 where we talked about the people he looked to for support.

**Excerpt 15: Family Ties**

D: And I got two other people, uhm. (0.3) Uh:, it's a marriage (sic) couple.

A: Mm-hm

D: They--they my best friend. (0.2) They think the world of me and always pushin' me. Always.

A: You need people like that around you.

D: They always check on my. They always call me. (0.2) You know. You alright. What's goin on? What's goin' on? (chuckles) You know, so. (0.2) That helps. (0.2) You know uhm (0.3) sometimes family don't--they don't do nothin', jus::

A: Family can disappoint.
D: Certain ones--the immediate ones, it's like the ones on the outside appreciate you more than your immediate ones.

A: Mm-hm

D: It hurts sometime, but you know, it's [inaudible]

A: but you move on. But you know what? You're blessed to have--

D: Yeah

A: --other people around you.

D: Mm-hm

A: It don't always come from the people you expect.

D: Yeah. My aunts--

A: But you get it nonetheless.

D: My aunt, she's like, "Oh yeah! I like this." [inaudible] to hear good news.

A: That's so nice.

D: Good news. She talks to the whole family, so they all know now. [that Don was enrolled at Pyramid]

(Don, Interview 2, Lines 867-888, 4-3-14)

As indicated in *Excerpt 15*, despite not having lots of support from his immediate family (i.e., siblings), Don had a handful of trusted friends and extended relatives whom he felt were genuinely supportive of him. One of the things I uncovered in talking to participants was that many did not discuss their plans to return to school with very many people, and in some cases not at all. Don was one of the people who deliberately operated in secrecy as he was going through his postsecondary choice experience. His rationale was to avoid hearing naysayers who would try to deter his ambitions, which actually
came to pass once he announced to his church that he was attending Pyramid Career School.

Aside from family influences, we talked briefly about what messages he remembered getting from high school many years earlier. Don essentially posited that there really was no push from school officials for him to further his education following high school graduation. He reported hating math and falling asleep in class as a teen. Yet, ironically he found himself working with numbers all the time in the restaurant business, for he was usually responsible for payroll. The one thing that did stick out in his mind was that his high school advocated that he pursue culinary arts. In the 1970s, this would have been considered a vocational education track.

**Indirect Role Models and Networking.** Despite limited mentorship while growing up, Don was nonetheless a voracious reader of the world and a very active participant in various church communities throughout his life. One of the striking things I noticed throughout our interviews was the number of stories he shared about people he looked up to and found inspiration from in living his life. As I looked across the transcripts, I noticed he often made sense of (i.e., storied) his experience through the stories of others. The range of individuals was remarkable in that Don could identify with the Incredible Hulk and Luther Vandross in one instance and draw parallels to Albert Einstein and Benjamin Franklin in another. His references to Einstein and Franklin’s lives, for instance, were used to support his viability as a learner and productive person at a late age, which relates to my earlier theme, self-efficacy. I discovered through the interviews that he had an avid interest in biographies, which he used in narrating and making
meaning of his own existence. Given Don’s strong ties to the church, I wondered if this was a literacy practice carried over from the way in which stories of the Bible are leveraged to teach people how to live and conduct their lives.

In addition to well-known figures in the church, entertainment, scientific, and political world, Don paid close attention to many ordinary people, too. Earlier I discussed one such acquaintance from church, Donte. Another person within his circle was a long-time friend, Kelly, who worked as an administrative supervisor of a doctor’s office. It was through Kelly that he learned that graduates of Pyramid got hired at her site. He also discussed a Russian immigrant he once worked with at the airport who successfully completed a program at ITT, which subsequently upgraded her employability and earnings. Such personal knowledge likely validated the idea of attending a career school or occupational training program rather than one of the many two-year or four-year institutions in the city. Furthermore, Don surmised from his former colleague’s experience that if she could handle school as a non-native speaker of English, surely he too could successfully complete school as he had fewer barriers to overcome. This perspective is all very emblematic of a growing confidence in Don through the reading of others’ lives in reflection of his own life. Another person informing his thinking was his church pastor, who actively promoted personal development and education to the congregation. Don reported that his pastor instituted an annual recognition day of all those who attained an educational achievement over the course of the year. One of Don’s most memorable accounts of this ceremony was the testimony of a young man who became a medical doctor after narrowly escaping life as a gang member. Collectively,
these experiences bring into focus how postsecondary choice as a literacy practice is shaped by reading the world as a text (Freire, 1970) rather than accessing literature. As it is clear that Don was making many text-to-self connections in his thinking about postsecondary education.

As described earlier, Don’s most recent pursuit of postsecondary education emanated from a conversation he had on the bus with a former church member, who identified a potential way for Don to receive free training. Similar to Luis Moll et al.’s (1992) demonstration of Mexican children’s homes as possessing important knowledge and resources, which sustained their individual and community livelihoods, Don’s church community served as a viable network in which he could access information about services and other resources—directly or indirectly. There were some limitations surrounding his access and use of this information resource, though, as is indicated by his reluctance to share his aspirations openly amongst the congregation. Nonetheless, Don agreed with my assertion that the church could and should formally create a stronger educational ministry to support people of all ages wanting to pursue postsecondary education as few resources are dedicated to serving adults in this capacity (Van Horn, 2013; Terri White, personal communication, March 23, 2015).

As Rios-Aguilar et al. (2011) would argue, the parallel of these contexts (i.e., Mexican children’s home in Moll et al.’s (1992) study and Don’s community context) is that the knowledge capital being circulated falls outside of the dominant culture’s perception of more esteemed forms of capital associated with Bourdieu’s (1986) notion of capital in regard to status attainment. Education at all levels has been a much coveted
resource throughout American history and strongly linked to the goal of status attainment. Yet, in leveraging Campano and Damico’s (2007) framing of “epistemic privilege” in the interpretive act of reading (pp. 225-226), Don employs a different reading of Pyramid’s potential in his life in contrast to what dominant ideologies of postsecondary education dictate. From his own situated context that is informed by his resources and the nature of opportunities available to him, framed by economics, age, educational attainment, and gender, Don’s decision is indeed a rational one.

Lastly, I note that Don’s first experience with postsecondary education in the 1980s occurred through colleague’s suggestion after they were laid off from the Philadelphia Navy Yard. Don recalled being told that he could not get access to better paying jobs without having more training and experience. Hence he enrolled in a safety and security training program at a small private, for-profit institution in Philadelphia. This occurrence, in conjunction to his more recent school experience, demonstrates that Don’s beliefs about postsecondary education are deeply correlated with job/occupational training. In debates about the purposes of postsecondary education in contemporary America, this is typically a frowned-upon perspective that is divided along the lines of social class.

*The Internet—Decision Making in Isolation.* One of the fascinating aspects of Don’s story about his pathway to Pyramid Career School was his engagement with the Internet. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) emphasize that the search process is very much a bi-directional process in which students not only seek institutions, but institutions also search for students. In their discussion of traditional-age college seekers, they highlight
that “communication strategies that colleges use to search for potential students has an impact on the search phase” (p. 213). I found this to be particularly relevant in Don’s case, especially with how he was lured to institutions under the guise of an employment opportunity. And secondly, in how Pyramid (and others) appeared in Don’s search results for “low budget nursing programs” and “free nursing programs,” despite being far from that in reality.

As illustrated earlier, the Internet was an important part of shaping his “choice set,” as described in phase two of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model. Don’s search phase was initially inspired by information relayed from former church member during a passing conversation on the bus. Yet, when that option (i.e., District 1199C) did not pan out for Don, he used the next best resource to find other similar opportunities. This is all logical, of course, yet what became illuminated in this story was the importance of having foundational knowledge about postsecondary education in order to make the best use of information obtained through the Internet. Theories of reading instruction often frame this as background knowledge (Marzano, 2004). Without it, it is theorized that readers will experience difficulty in comprehending what they read. Alternative readings of this scenario might posit information literacy as the real issue; however, I assert that background knowledge is a stronger claim that is supported by many other scholars’ (e.g., Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Freeman; Perna, 2006; Rosenbaum et al., 2006) discussions about the prevalence of inaccurate knowledge about postsecondary education circulating amongst first-generation, low-income, and minority populations.
Because of fear of ridicule, Don felt uncomfortable about discussing his desires openly with others in his social sphere. Hence this cut him off from other possible resources that could have potentially provided at least some of the “background knowledge” need to interpret and vet his options. Therefore, Don virtually made his decision in isolation.

Leading up to his engagement with the Internet to find Pyramid Career School, Don shared several fascinating stories of how he was introduced to the Internet and his subsequent experiences using it. The first of these stories was when he described “accidentally” getting an Android phone, which Don eventually found his way to use to search for medical advice. The second memorable experience occurred when he was permitted to use the computer at one of his security posts. Don was astounded by the ability to find information on anything he desired, and was immediately enthralled by the vast body of resources the Internet made available to people with merely a phone, and an even more so with a computer.

Excerpt 16: The Whole World Right Here in Front of You!

A: So, do you:: like look through newspapers, do you ever read any newspapers anymore?

D: Uh::: newspapers bored me. I like the Internet now.

A: So, so you’re sold--your information--any information that you’d be looking for would be on the Internet.--

D: --mm-hm

A: That's your first go-to.

D: Yes. Uhm:

A: Go ahead, cause it's important to know like how do people access information.
D: I, You know I was at uh, my last time, they had me at [former job site]. We, but they said, we could use the computers

A: mm-hm

D: So, while I was sittin’ there lookin’ out two windows watchin’ the people, watchin’ the monitors I could go on the computer and look up anything I want. Download, do applications, everything, so. It was, I was like, Wow! It's the whole world right here in front of you, you know.

A: mmm-hm

D: Yep. I said if I would've--I would've had this (computer access), I probably would've did all this earlier.

A: Really?

D: I, I even said, if I would've known (0.4) uhm, knew about the medical field in this aspect, I would have did it earlier. I said I'd probably be a surgeon by now. (chuckles)

(Don, Interview 1, 3-31-14)

Excerpt 16 underscores how Don comes to appreciate the potential of the Internet in improving the quality of his life. In an ironic way, the Internet seems to be responsible for actually first awakening Don’s senses to the prospect of enrolling in school when he was lured to the for-profit sector through a misleading job posting (described in Excerpt 2). In terms of Hossler and Gallagher’s model, this would likely be considered an important predisposition factor. Although I do not have much specific information about the content of Don’s talks with Strayer University and the University of Phoenix, it seems clear that those encounters served as an important lightening rod to Don’s persistent desire to enroll in school between 2010 and 2013.
Case Summary

In this case study presentation of Don’s postsecondary choice experience, I sought to learn about the nuances of his personal journey in arriving at Pyramid Career School, the resources he drew upon in his decision-making and the factors that mediated his decision to attend a for-profit institution vs. one of the many non-profit options throughout the Philadelphia region. Additionally, I was curious about participants’ sense making of their postsecondary choice. In concluding this chapter, I offer the following summarization of what I learned. First, I will provide a list of the major factors that appear to have influenced his decision to enroll at Pyramid, which will be followed by a list of elements that seemed not to make a difference in his decision making. My construction of these lists are the result Don’s interview responses in relation to what various scholars have noted about factors influencing “college” choice, when such links are possible. Lastly, I will provide a summarizing discussion of his postsecondary choice experience, which will highlight for readers my major takeaways from his story.
Table 3

Factors Influencing Don’s Decisions to Enroll at Pyramid Career School

- The economy and a crisis with employment
- Reading others’ experiences in reference to promising opportunities in health care, which served to narrow his focus to schools offering such programs
- Not having access to information or neutral people with which he could discuss his interests in school. In essence, he made his decision in isolation.
- Reliance on the Internet without having in-depth knowledge about postsecondary education to guide his decision-making.
- Price/cost
- Access to financial aid
- Short-term nature of the program
- Getting past admissions barriers such as entrance exams
- Having inside knowledge about students’ getting placed in jobs after training.
- Having a positive experience with the admissions counselors and initial campus visit

Note: This should not be considered an exhaustive list.

Table 4

Factors Appearing to Have Less of an Influence on Don’s Postsecondary Choice

- Distance
- Cost of Attendance (mediated by financial in the end)
- Input from others
- Accreditation
- Campus amenities
- Institutional type (i.e., for-profit)
- Gainful Employment information

Note: This should not be considered an exhaustive list.
I entered this study with a focus on adults’ decision-making about entering postsecondary education, and found myself interviewing a much more mature audience of learners than I initially envisioned finding. Interviews with participants such as Don, who were in their 50s and 60s, brought to surface a whole other array of questions and considerations regarding the postsecondary choice process of adults. I feel that their experience of this phenomenon is greatly mediated by their personal circumstances in life and in very powerful ways—as Don’s story illuminates. Hence my initial framing of adults as somewhat of a homogenous group has been disrupted in a meaningful way through this research.

Although there is a growing body of adults enrolling in postsecondary in the United States (Merriam & Bierema, 2014), life stage scholarship typically segments educational attainment as something occurring earlier in one’s life (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Shanahan, 2000). However, given the changing landscape of the workplace, where the days of well-paying manufacturing jobs and other plentiful opportunities for medium to low-skilled workers have greatly dissipated, the need to completely retrain or bolster one’s existing skills in a current occupation is an issue affecting many middle-aged workers (Van Horn, 2013). With such a milieu framing Don’s postsecondary choice experience, the issue of age and the potential return on investment for various types of credentials was something I began to ponder about in relation to his decision-making.

As reported in Don’s case, the economy was a significant factor in his decision to enter school at the age of 57, which is not a small undertaking. In Don’s case, the decision to enter Pyramid for a short-term program made perfect sense on several fronts.
Firstly, he needed an educational opportunity that would permit him to re-enter the workforce quickly. Consideration about length of training was indeed important, as he did not have spousal support or extensive savings and other resources to ease his financial crises. Further, Pyramid provided occupational training that would lead to a specific range of jobs. This was comforting to many participants, including Don. One of the critiques of “higher education” is that it often does not prepare students for specific types of jobs, leaving them to figure this out on their own with sometimes very disappointing outcomes (Bailey, Badway, & Gumport, 2001; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Person, Rosenbaum, & Deil-Amen, 2006). This is particularly true for less affluent students who do not possess the social capital better-connected students use to advance professionally (Bergerson, 2009). Additionally, students put great emphasis on the potential of their externships leading to permanent employment opportunities, as many described an excruciatingly difficult time of getting a response to their applications for jobs prior to entering school.

Second, along the lines of “epistemic privilege,” it is important to highlight what Don did know (Campano & Damico, 2007). Don had prior experience attending an occupational training program that allowed him access to jobs in the past. Similarly, he had knowledge of others in his social world, who showed that it was possible to gain access to perceivably stable, and good-paying jobs through short-term occupational training programs. Interestingly, Don and other participants were also cognizant in framing their enrollment at Pyramid as a merely a “starting point” in their career and

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9 My use of these terms is relative Don’s context.
educational trajectories. Don, as well as several others, expressed aspirations to become entrepreneurs or to extend their learning to attain career advancement. Mostly, everyone’s immediate concern, however, was to re-establish financial stability in their lives.

Third, despite the high cost of Pyramid’s programs in comparison to some other local options, the price was made affordable through financial aid—which was critical to his ability to enroll in school. Participants generally did not express concern about the cost of their program. Repeatedly, students discussed having to pay only $80 per month—which was deemed very affordable by all. Last, but not any less important, was the positive interaction Don had with his admission’s counselor, who served as an important figure in helping Don plan a course of direction.

In general, Don’s story reflected that of many first-generation college aspirants for which college access programs have been created to support their entry into postsecondary education. As Don exclaimed at several instances during our interviews, he did not have a lot of knowledge about postsecondary education or careers, nor did he really know where to obtain such information. Hence he largely conducted his search for schools and programs via the Internet and in secrecy to avoid ridicule from naysayers. This finding highlights the need for educational access workers, policy makers, community and church leaders, etc., to take initiative in expanding such support services to adults who are increasingly finding themselves having to seek formal educational/training to access jobs in our evolving economy. As my research reveals, Don is hardly alone in having to engage in such decision-making.
Unlike a lot of adults, however, Don and the others featured in this research were special in their ability to overcome a range of fears and other barriers they might have had about returning to school (Van Horn, 2013). I do believe that the crises nature of his situation (as was the case with many other participants in this study) was a strong predisposition factor in motivating his enrollment at Pyramid. One of the things that struck me about Don’s decision to enroll at Pyramid Career School, was the immediacy of his decision making. He appeared to have spent very little time mulling over other potential options, and basically went with the first opportunity that became available to him. I surmised that, in part, this was the result of a tiresome and frustrating journey of trying to enter a program and finally locating one in which there were no roadblocks. This, however, is not to overlook that he really liked what saw Pyramid offering him.

“It’s never too late…Ain’t ever too late. That’s all I could say.”

(Don, interview 2, 4-3-14)
CHAPTER FIVE
THE STORY OF HEAVEN: POSTSECONDARY CHOICE IN THE CONTEXT OF FEAR, GUT INSTINCT, AND THE MYSTICAL FORCES OF NATURE.

And somebody said to me, they said when you go to the school--when you want to go to school, it's like everything else--you'll know what the right school is. You'll know exactly where to go. You'll, you'll feel it.
(Heaven, Interview 1, 4-23-14)

On April 23, 2014, I had the first of several conversations with Heaven, a 42-year old, Caucasian mother of one child. Heaven was friendly with Mack, Whilomena, and Vivian, who had already agreed to participate in my study. I met Heaven when I came to complete Mack’s second interview as they were in the midst of having lunch. Having already heard about the others’ positive experience with the interviews, Heaven eagerly volunteered to be a participant of this study. She was the fourth person I interviewed for this research.

My impression of Heaven was that she was a girly girl. She was gregarious, extremely personable, and lover of all things feminine. We seemed to click easily, which was evident by the length of the interviews—one of which went 2.5 hours long. In the midst of telling her story, the interviews often went off-topic in discussing relationships, family, how much the work world and economy had changed, and both her desires and fears of the future. Over time, Heaven continued to demonstrate herself to be a very open person, who walked on the carefree side of life—all of which made her a pleasure to interview. Although I am deeply appreciative of the time Heaven gave to my inquiries, it occurred to me that I was probably helping her as much as she was helping me.
Scholars (Riessman, 2008; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2006) talk about the significance of the interviewers positionality in the research relationship, to which I spent a lot of time thinking about as I went about connecting with various participants. When I met Heaven, she had recently become a widow and appeared to really need to be in communion with others as she sorted out her new circumstances. Hence I became something of a sounding board and confidante for her in this research experience.

In the year prior to my meeting her, Heaven’s husband took seriously ill and was unable to work. Consequently, the family lost their home and had to move into much tighter living quarters with her in-laws, which she described as something of a strain. However, without her in-laws’ support she might otherwise be homeless following the death of her husband. Hence her arrival at Pyramid was part of a bigger life chapter of Heaven having to begin her life anew.

Although Heaven had gone through a very trying year in 2013, she was very positive and upbeat. As we talked, I learned that she had recently begun a new relationship quite unexpectedly since coming to Pyramid. Talk of this relationship actually consumed quite a bit of our conversation time, as she was obviously working through a myriad of issues surrounding it—first and foremost the “approval” of her in-laws to date! Despite an outward appearance of being optimistic about her future, it became apparent to me through the tenor of her voice on the interview tapes that Heaven felt extremely insecure about the future and was somewhat traumatized by the past. Not only had she recently lost her husband, but everyone in the household she grew up in had also died (i.e., father, grandmother, grandfather, and aunt), making her feel especially
alone and vulnerable. In coming to Pyramid, however, Heaven appeared to have found a temporary oasis from her troubles. Not only had she found a positive educational environment that gave her confidence in her ability as a learner, she found what she described as a second family in the new relationships she built with fellow students and her instructors, many of whom were African American.

In the pages that follow, I re-narrate Heaven’s postsecondary choice experience according to prominent themes that emerged in her story, often using excerpts of our interview to assist in clarifying my analysis or to allow readers to hear Heaven in her own words. As described in the methodology section, I used Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) college choice model and Perna’s (2006) proposed model as a guiding lens in examining my data. However, I also allowed myself to be open beyond these frameworks as the theory and research informing those models is primarily based off of traditional-age students with an emphasis on enrollment not-for-profit, four-year baccalaureate institutions. Further, the contexts of adulthood and for-profit institutions have rarely been studied using either model (Perna, 2006; 2013).

My analysis is based off of two formal interviews, which I conducted on April 23 and April 30, 2014 and is supplemented by my communication with Heaven on several occasions beyond the formal interviews either in person, via e-mail, or by phone. For instance, when we met in person again in late June 2014, Heaven generously loaned me all of her admissions materials to review (i.e., financial aid documents, enrollment agreement forms, admissions paperwork) and provided me with an update on how she was strategizing her way into an externship site, as well as how some of her classmates
were progressing towards the completion of their externships, etc. I briefly communicated with her a few times more in the summer of 2014, and then I briefly caught up with her as she was in the midst of beginning a new school in September 2014. Much later I ran into Heaven while shopping in June 2015, where we talked for about 2 hours in a store aisle. The timing was opportune as I was in the midst of revising her chapter, and I got a chance to confirm with her some of my findings. She also informed me of her status at her new school, when we chatted twice more in summer 2015. Aside from this wealth of information, Heaven also responded to my Qualtrics survey.

“How am I going survive…?”
(Heaven, Interview 1, Lines 27, 4/23/2014)

In fall 2013, Heaven became a widow. Her husband’s illness prior to his death wreaked havoc on the family’s financial stability, and there was, in essence, nothing left for her to live off of beyond the issuance of Social Security survivors’ benefits following his death. Because of Heaven’s young age (42), SS survivor benefits would only be provided to her on a short-term basis while her child remained a minor. This provided Heaven a window of just a few years before she would have no income; hence, there was immense pressure for her to become a wage earner again after primarily being a stay-at-home mother since the birth of her child. In explicit and implicit ways, it became clear to me that Heaven was operating in crises mode, as she was confronted with really having to take care of herself for the first time. In interview two, she assessed her own upbringing as one in which she was “coddled,” thus leaving her completely unprepared to deal with her current reality.
Although Heaven was grateful to her in-laws for sheltering her and her child, she recognized that this scenario was not a long-term option. Tensions existed in the household as Heaven’s in-laws were quite elderly, and they appeared to harbor some resentment about her not acting sooner to establish herself careerwise. After several unsuccessful attempts at finding a job, Heaven quickly came to the realization that she had to return to school in order to make a life for herself and her child. It was clear to Heaven that the work world had drastically changed since the last time she participated in it as a part-time store clerk in 2004. As with just about all of my participants, changes in the 21st century workforce and economy served as a significant “predisposition” factor in their pursuit of postsecondary education at this time in their lives (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 210).

“So, uhm, I figured I wanted to be a uhm, what do you call it? A court reporter.”
(Heaven, Interview 1, Line 50, 4/23/14)

When I asked Heaven to describe her journey to Pyramid, she stated that her school decision-making process began with the notion of wanting to become a court reporter. Although Heaven was not able to specifically pinpoint where she got the idea to become a court reporter, she was able to recall what she found appealing about the job: “I figured this way I'd have Monday to Friday. I'd have holidays off. I'd have basically, except the summer, the same schedule as my (child)—which would be perfect” (Heaven, Interview 1, Lines 53-55, 4/23/14). In essence, such a position would allow Heaven to prioritize her role as a mother. Hence she set out to identify schools via the Internet that would prepare her for that career track. In making her first institutional contact, she spoke
with an admissions’ representative, who dissuaded Heaven from her plan of pursuing court reporting as described in *Excerpt 1* below.

*Excerpt 1: Career and School Shopping*

H: And uhm, so I called different schools. And the one guy said to me--he says go into medical billing and coding. He says, that's the up and coming thing.

A: Really?

H: Yeah, that's how I got into medical billing and coding. I wouldn't have thought of this. But another school told me to go into this. I was like, Wow!

A: What school was this?

H: (sighs) I don't remember. It was like a **trade school**.

A: You're kidding.

H: But yeah, that's what he told me [to go into]

A: [ that was ] nice that he was, that he did that

H: Oh, yeah

A: Like

H: Cause he told me that court reporting, he says, (0.3) they do offer it, but they're very. The schools that offer it aren't very close. He says it's really a dying profession. He says because nowadays in courts all they have to do is put on a recorder, and they record ya that way.

A: mm-hmm

H: He says they don't need to

A: (interjects) That makes sense

H: You know, they don't need somebody to take notes [like they used to]

A: [transcriptionists] like they used to have, that’s right.
H: He says they do have them, don't get me wrong. He says they are there, but they're people who are older that's been doing it for a while. So he says, you don't need that. He says go into medical billing and coding.

(Heaven, Interview 1, Lines 56-77, 4-23-14)

I included this long stretch of transcript because it depicts an element that I noted across most participants, that career searching and/or particular job aspirations were a central part of their institutional choice process in a way that often completely eliminated the non-profit, degree sector from the start. More importantly, this excerpt also demonstrates the way in which admissions representatives often acted as surrogate guidance counselors in participants’ decision-making.

Despite Heaven having plenty of encouragement to enroll in school from family and neighbors, I learned that she largely operated on her own in trying to determine a career direction and institution to attend—and somewhat in panic mode. As I listened across my interviews with her, it became clear that Heaven’s thinking about “next steps” was not merely encouraged, but heavily driven by her family’s insistence of her coming up with a plan to become independent. The essence of her in-laws’ pressure shines through particularly well in the following story Heaven shared with me as we discussed the positive experience she was having at Pyramid:

Excerpt 2:

H: But the other day mother-in-law and I were talkin' and she was sayin' (0.3) "Oh, well you needed something to give you a kick in the ass." (0.2) Meaning by [her husband’s] death. (0.7) She says "I wish you had done this years ago." -- Going back to school. (0.8) Well (0.6) yeah, but we don't always do things when we're sup--
The pressure being applied by her in-laws was also revealed in how Heaven describes having to report back to them almost daily about her progress in searching for viable educational programs. Hence it is clear that her new life circumstances served as a critical predisposition factor in Heaven’s interest in enrolling in a postsecondary program at this time in her life (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). In the title of this chapter, my use of the word “fear” was selected as it largely espouses from Heaven’s apparent trepidation about having to be responsible for herself in the absence of her husband and those who raised her, and is in essence, apt in capturing her mindset as Heaven embarked on this experience of identifying a career and a school to which she could be trained. It also foreshadows other fears Heaven possessed as a learner, which I will discuss later.

Because of the excess distance she would have to travel, Heaven discontinued communication with the admissions representative who advised her to enroll in a medical billing and coding (MBC) program at his school and began searching for schools with such programs that were nearer to her home. In the next section, I will discuss the nuances of the remainder of Heaven’s search process.

**Intuition as an Evaluative Metric of Institutional Fit**

*Excerpt 3: Reading the World as a Source of Knowledge*

A: Did you have any type of criteria about what constitutes a good school?

H: >No!<

A: Okay. [So you didn't ha]ve any particular,
H: [I just went with] No.

A: =And you didn't talk to anybody about, "Can you make a recommendation? or"

H: Nope!

A: The only conversation pretty much took place was just with your in-laws, for the most part?=

H: Yeah.

A: =About looking

H: Yeah.

A: =About next steps maybe, I guess, is probably [inaudible]

H: Yeah, next steps uhm (0.3) Trying to figure out what to do, where to go. (0.6) And then I just kind of started (0.8) trying to get my feel of where I wanted to go (0.2) and try to go to the schools around here.

(Heaven, Interview 2, Lines 1464-1478, April 30, 2014)

As discussed in the prior section, Heaven was mainly figuring out her career and educational path on her own, and seemingly did not have many people to which she could talk to about her decision-making. One of the curious things that emerged in our conversations about how she investigated schools was how she primarily relied on intuition, or what she referred to as “gut feeling” to guide her search and selection process. Toward the end of Excerpt 3 (next to last line), Heaven uses a similar phrase, “my feel of where I wanted to go” to describe her orientation towards searching for a viable institution. Aside from the first admissions representative she spoke to, who advised her to pursue MBC, Heaven discussed with me her exploration of three other schools, which ended with her matriculation at Pyramid Career School. Contained in this section is an account of how Heaven both found and evaluated each of these schools.
Following this overview, and integral to Heaven’s construction of a choice set of institutions (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), I also address the way in which Heaven’s family and K-12 educational experiences shaped her decision making process.

**The Local Community College.**

Heaven described her search process as beginning with the Internet, as most participants of this study shared. But she quickly took to searching on foot following her first encounter with a school that was too far for her to commute to daily. Following the advice she received from that first admissions representative about the employment prospects of medical billing and coding, Heaven fixed her search on institutions offering this program with a short commutable area to where she lived. The first of these was the local community college. Heaven reported visiting the community college for information about their MBC program mainly because she had an existing record there from many years earlier, although she withdrew after attending for only one week. Heaven quickly assessed, however, in this latest search for educational programs that the community college would not be the place for her. Her rationale went as follows:

*Excerpt 4: “It Just Didn’t Feel Right”*

H: Cause it was overpowering to me. It was overwhelming. [ It was just ] so crowded. It was just=

A: [Was it really?]

A: =Too many students, too many people?

H: Yeah, and I just felt like I would've been (0.9)

A: Invisible.
H: Exactly. I don't think it would have been like anything like this. I think I would have been just a number.

A: Did you feel like you had like a connection or anything. Like what was the experience like when you talked to them, when you approached them? (0.3) What was that like--cause you talked very much about Eden and

H: Right.

A: Like--the interaction that you had.

H: Uhmmm, when I talked to them. I mean they were nice, but I don't know. It just didn't feel right. (0.3) I don't know. You just can't, it was just a gut feeling. To me, it just didn't feel right.

A: Really?

H: And from my understanding even though they have the medical billing and coding out there I would have been through a lot more courses than just you know going to like a trade school and doing it.

A: Okay.

H: It would have been uhm more intense with the anatomy and this and that. And if you flunk, you're in trouble. And, I don't think you would have the attention that you get here.

A: Okay.

H: I don't think you would have uhm In here it seems like it's more personal.

A: Okay

H: You know. It's not overwhelming. It's not, you know, they don't--they only want so many people per class.

A: Oh really? How big is your class usually?

H: 16, I think.

A: Really?
H: Something like that. Yeah. (0.3) Uhm, so the classes in here are a lot smaller than (0.2) going to the community college where there's, (0.3) we'll say 50 people.

A: Did you talk to someone in the medical billing and coding area?

H: Not there. I was mostly just in where they do office work.

A: [Okay.]

H: [ But ]

A: Like admissions, kind of?

H: Yeah. That kind of stuff, but (0.2) it just didn't (0.5) I don't know. I just didn't like it.

A: Did you do like a comp--comparison with costs?

H: No, not even close.

A: No?

H: No, cause I had no interest in it.

A: So, you were like (0.3) [turned off], that was it.

H: [ Forget it ] Exactly. It was like a light switch.

A: Okay.

H: >It didn't interest me. I didn't want to go, and see ya later!<

(Heaven, Interview 2, Lines 1375-1424, 4/30/14)

Although I could have summarized Heaven’s response to the community college, I felt it was important for readers to hear Heaven’s own words about why the community college—which is often hailed by scholars as the more economical route to take for such a program—was rejected by Heaven. Throughout this excerpt it is quite evident how central a role her intuition played in identifying an institution in which to enroll.

Admittedly, I had been taken aback by Heaven’s persistent reference to her “gut feeling”
in regard to her decision-making process—particularly since it seemed to be one of the main criteria of her decision making—not price, accreditation, school reputation, quality of program, job placement rates, etc. Yet, it was through dialogic engagement (Ravitch & Carl, 2015) with others that helped to bring my perspective into much needed refocusing, reminding me of my positionality in this research.

Clearly, I was judging Heaven’s process as peculiar based on my own insider perspective as a higher education professional, where I have been trained to advise college aspirants to employ a rational checklist approach in considering their options. One day I happened to run across Amaury Nora’s (2004) article in my pile of research literature, in which he described how traditional-age students in his study made precisely the same remarks about using their intuition in selecting a postsecondary school. The overarching message of Nora’s study was that “students use cognitive and intuitive processes—the heart as well as the head” when choosing an institution to enroll in (p. 197). Nora further reported finding that “Feeling accepted, safe, and comfortable in a new academic and social setting is a quality of the college choice process that has greater relevance for students making their final decision than other factors such as institutional quality, location, diversity, or cost (p. 198-199)—all of which was true in Heaven’s scenario. I stopped analyzing participants’ stories momentarily to reflectively write about my own college decision-making experiences, and subsequently found that Nora’s words/findings resonated deeply in my own college decision-making process—particularly in the context of selecting a doctoral program. Through time and distance, I
had simply forgotten about the role of my emotional responses to the institutions I had an interest in.

Individual intuition, according to Nora (2004), “is best described as the psychological and social reactions that allow students to make the finer distinctions about which college to attend from among those they could attend” (p. 200). Hence students in his research reported that they relied on “inner cues or vibes to sort out their feelings” about institutions within their choice set (p. 200). Interestingly, Nora found that students who relied on intuition in their postsecondary choice process were highly satisfied with their enrollment decisions, citing that they would readily select the same institution again (p. 200). I found this to be very true in Heaven’s case, as she spoke very fondly of her experience at Pyramid. As described in Excerpt 4 above, Pyramid was “personal” and “not overwhelming.”

Before moving on from Excerpt 4, I have a few other observations to offer about Heaven’s assessment of the community college as a non-choice. Through careful analysis of the interview transcripts, I came to see that Heaven’s assertions about her gut feelings were in part grounded on experiences she already had, reminding me of the literacy-based conceptual framework informing this research, wherein Freire asserts a “critical understanding” the act of reading as follows:

Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world….The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context. (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 29)

Although Heaven’s scenario is not about learning to read per se, her ability to vet schools via decoding contexts using her knowledge and experience of the world
deeply aligns with aspects of Freire’s construction of literacy in that our first practice of literacy is that of reading the world and our experiences in and of the world (p. 29-31). It is apparent that she is drawing from an earlier experience when she discussed class size as she did not actually venture to discuss the MBC program with a representative of that department. This was her experience of the community college as a much younger student—and probably even in high school. Having this background knowledge helped her to assess the community college’s fit in this new era. A mere quick look around campus confirmed that such a setting was still too big and alienating for her desire to be connected with others. As I reflect on Heaven’s existence at Pyramid and the subsequent institution she enrolled in following Pyramid’s closing, I noted that Heaven was an exceptional networker. She appeared to leave no stone unturned in getting to know the schools’ personnel (from top to bottom) and her classmates. She was apt at reading environments to determine if they would afford her the community setting and accessibility to people she required to be successful.

Second, Heaven’s concerns about the heightened requirements of the curriculum indexed her insecurities as a learner, which were based on earlier academic experiences she had, as I will discuss later in this chapter. This was especially worrisome because Heaven was indeed working within a specified time frame to get herself work ready. Therefore, she could not afford becoming entangled in a program that might prove too difficult to complete or take longer than necessary. The community college certificate program required approximately six semesters to complete, and consisted of almost 50 credit hours of work that included courses such as Student Success, College Composition,
and Anatomy and Physiology I and II. Heaven expressly wanted to learn a “trade” without all the academic formality that community colleges attempt to integrate in such programs (Bailey, et al., 2001) as there remains within the community college sector an underlying agenda to usher students toward bachelor’s degree attainment (Bailey et al.; Zumani-Gallaher, 2004; Perna, 2013).

**Take three!**

In addition to rejecting the local community college on the basis of “gut feeling,” Heaven reported visiting one other for-profit institution prior to checking out Pyramid Career School. She describes the experience as follows in *Excerpt 5*:

**Excerpt 5: Negative Vibrations**

H: I don't know if it wasn't that, I just couldn't go into that school. I just could not---I just looked at those people and couldn't go in.

A: What was goin' on, I mean, what was so charac---what, what, What bugged you?

H: I (sigh)

A: Were they hootin' and hollerin'? I mean what was going on?

H: No! It was just like they were gettin’ dismissed, I don't know if it was the buses, I don't know if it was the uniforms. It was just--I didn't want to be seen (0.3) walkin’ into it. I couldn't tell ya.

A: Did they look tacky? (chuckle)

H: No!: I just couldn't go in there. I just--something inside me just would not let go in there. I took the car--I never even parked the car.[ I just took the car and turned it around and went down the road.]

(Heaven, Interview 1, Lines 448-457, 4-23-14)

Throughout my subsequent conversations with Heaven, there was no further explanation ever provided about her reaction to this school. Initially, I believed that maybe Heaven saw too many non-white students at the school and that it made her feel
uncomfortable to potentially be the minority. However, through subsequent conversations with Heaven, there was considerable evidence against this assertion. In my observations of Heaven, she really did have a genuine bond with the African American students in her program. As we talked about what she liked about being in school at this juncture in her life, she referred to her peers as her “family away from [her] family” (Heaven, Interview 2, Line 557, 4-30-14). She also expressed sincere empathy to the plight of students attending poor schools in Philadelphia, and further shared an interesting conversation she had with a neighbor about her experience with diversity at Pyramid. The sum of these experiences squelched my initial suspicions, and allowed me to simply accept Heaven’s gut reaction for what it was.

Later, as Heaven got into a pattern of framing her enrollment at Pyramid as a matter of fate (e.g., “things happen for a reason”), we laughed, in part, about her being mysteriously led to Pyramid to meet her new significant other. Strangely enough, she visited a psychic who asserted that she was supposed to meet her new partner and that it was her deceased husband who was responsible for leading her to the new man in her life. The psychic’s account was preceded by a fellow classmate who also asserted that Heaven was directed to enroll at Pyramid because she was supposed to meet her new partner there. The classmate had similarly become a widow and was mysteriously reunited with an old flame following her husband’s death. Over the duration of my contact with Heaven, she continued to try to make sense out of her new relationship, which had seemingly become deeply intertwined with her why she chose to enroll at Pyramid—from a standpoint of fate and spiritual intervention. It would be an
understatement to say that following this theme did not come with some trepidation on my part. Yet, the mystical essence of her decision-making is so strong throughout my data sources that I simply acquiesced to talking about this finding.

**Welcome to Pyramid Career School.**

After hurriedly leaving the last school’s parking lot, Heaven immediately drove over to another “trade school” that she attended in the 1990s to learn of their program offerings. This was a curious move in that Heaven articulated that the school did nothing other than take her money when she attended it for some type of computer training. When pressed about why she would want to return there, Heaven clarified that she went to merely have something to report to her in-laws about actively searching for a program of study. Instead of finding her alma mater, though, she found that Pyramid Career School had taken over the space. From the moment Heaven met admission representative, Eden, she was sold on enrolling at Pyramid. In essence, it was love at first site.

*Excerpt 6: I liked Eden*

H: I didn't know Pyramid had took over. And XXXXX had went out of business. So, I went. So I came, and I, you know, followed the signs, came up off the street, and uhm, they called Eden. And Eden came, and she talked to me. And I liked Eden. There was something about her that I liked. (0.3) And I seemed interested, and one thing led to another and here I am.

(Heaven, Interview 1, Lines 110-113, 4-23-14)

After searching for schools on the Internet and on foot, Heaven had finally found one that made her *feel comfortable*. With a sigh of relief, she successfully concluded the *search* and *choice phase* of her postsecondary choice journey. In an additional reflection she had about choosing Pyramid in Interview 2, Heaven remarked:
Excerpt 7: That comforting feeling

There’s a reason why (0.3) I had that comfort—comforting feeling to come here with Eden. Rather it would have been Eden, Jordan, whoever…Uhm (0.3) I don’t know. (0.2) It was just (0.3) that time. It was just the place I needed to be.

(Heaven, Interview 2, 4-30-14)

This excerpt, of course, echoes the intuitive nature of her institutional vetting process, and in also aligns with many of Heaven’s other contemplations about being led to Pyramid to meet the man she currently dates. In regard to the intuitive aspect of her decision-making process, Heaven’s initial impression of Pyramid as a good fit for her centered on her connection with Eden, the admissions representative. Eden was indeed very charismatic and appeared to have a gift in connecting with students in a warm and caring way. In my conversation with Eden, she revealed that she was personally familiar with the difficult circumstances that many people sought to overcome at Pyramid. Eden was herself a first-generation college-goer, who came from a single-parent home in which her mother not only battled to become financially independent as an adult learner, but she also had to actively fight against the stigma of having bi-racial children. Elliott Mishler (1986) talks about the importance of a shared discourse between interlocutors in order for an effective exchange to occur. Hence Eden’s leveraging of her own background appeared to provide her with the ability to connect well with potential applicants, for she knew something about their struggles from personal experience and professional practice of working with such students for a number of years in a proprietary education context.
Additional Noticings about Pyramid as the Final Choice

Academic Identity as a Mediating Force in Choice Set.

A fundamental belief in college access (e.g., Freeman, 2005; Perna, 2013; Rosenbaum, 2001; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2007; Swail, 2014), college choice (e.g., Perna, 2006; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McDonough, 1997; Manski & Wise, 1983; Swail, 2014) and college completion (Adelman, 1999; 2006; Perna, 2006; Swail, 2014) scholarship is that individuals’ participation in postsecondary education has a lot to do with their K-12 education experiences of academic achievement and academic preparation. This appeared to hold true in Heaven’s situation, where she repeatedly asserted a discomfort with school using phrases such as “I’m not a person for school” (Interview 1, 4/23/14, Line 879); I had no interest in school.” (Interview 1, 4-23-14, Line 890); “I really wasn’t the greatest student in the world.” (Interview 1, 4-23-14, Line 991). Therefore, this perception was indeed very influential in how she went about constructing a choice set of schools to investigate further.

As a reminder, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) define a choice set as “a group of institutions that a student has decided to apply to and seek more information about in order to make a better final matriculation decision” (p. 214). Although Heaven asserted that she had no hardcore criteria in mind in evaluating her school options, it became clear by the end of the second interview, however, that she really had zero interest in attending a 2-year or 4-year college because she had such a strong perception of herself as not being academically inclined. The following excerpt comes from a segment of the
interview where I asked Heaven how she thought about and differentiated her postsecondary education options.

Excerpt 8: This is the best option

H: And the last thing I’d ever do is the college-college. (0.3) Uhm, because I just wasn’t into school. I never kept the grades. (0.2) Maybe cause I’m older, I would have paid more attention now.

A: Yeah.

H: It’s hard to say.

A: Yeah.

H: I never looked into it that far, so (0.3) But right now I’m in my situation—this would be—this is the best option.

A: Okay. (Heaven, Interview 2, lines 1582-1590, 4-30-14)

Heaven’s assessment of “trade schools” and “career schools” as her best option appears to actually be a convergence of two factors: a) the time constraints she faced with receiving Social Security benefits and b) her perception of herself as a student. First and foremost, it was very important that she be able to get a job in the very near future. Hence degree programs would take too long to complete, and as expressed by other participants, degree programs are perceived as ambiguous in terms of yielding concrete job prospects. Pyramid, instead, Heaven asserted, would “set me off and send me out to work right away” (Heaven, Interview 2, Line 1575, 4-30-15).

The second factor—how Heaven assessed herself as a student—was quite profound in shaping her postsecondary trajectory. Heaven attended a large, diverse public high school in Delaware County, PA, at which she described feeling quite alienated
socially and academically. It is unclear if she had a learning disability, but she clearly internalized the notion that she was not the academic type. In the excerpt that follows, her disassociation with school and academics is made clear at not just a personal level, but it appears socially and institutionally forged as well.

*Excerpt 9: The Formation of an Academic Identity*

H: A lot of them I knew didn't go to college. [referring to her friends]

A: Did the school push? Do you remember, at that point, was there a push in your high school to sort of like

H: No

A: No, not really

H: I guess if you're more focused and educated [then they] would've probably pushed you harder or more, but I don't remember that.

A: [ mm-hm ] okay

H: Not on my end anyway.

A: Okay. Did they do like—I don't know—what-did they offer vo-tech or anything?

H: They offered vo-tech, and I went to go be a beautician and my father said absolutely not! My daughter's not gonna be uhm another, I forget how he worded it. Uhm. How did he word it? (0.3) He says they're a dime a dozen. He says, no, that's not going to be my daughter, so he refused to send me to vo-tech.

A: Are you serious?

H: I'm dead serious. That's how I found out he wanted me to be a lawyer…. (Interview 1, lines 1389-1402, 4-23-14)

What is noteworthy in the clip above is that although Heaven identifies that she was not perceived to be academically inclined by school officials; ironically, her family seemed to position her more positively as a learner, as evidenced in her father’s
expressed dreams of her becoming an attorney and at another point in our interviews, her grandmother’s offer to pay her way through community college en route to becoming a teacher. It makes me wonder about the differing ways her family and school officials measured Heaven’s abilities, and suggests that each had different interpretations of what constituted being smart and capable. Unfortunately, whatever was communicated institutionally (through her school) is what shaped her self-concept most. Just as Heaven aimed to pursue a vocational trade in high school, her postsecondary education pursuits in the present parallel this focus.

**Family Influences on Educational Attainment.**

Another element that appeared to implicitly impact Heaven’s postsecondary choice experience was the examples of what adults in her family did educationally and occupationally. College choice scholarship typically frames this element in Bourdieuan terms as “habitus”—meaning “the internalized set of dispositions and preferences that is derived from one’s surroundings and that subconsciously define what is a “reasonable” action (Perna, 2006, p. 113). As the passage that follows demonstrates, Heaven grew up in a working class family where she saw her immediate family members obtain reasonably good jobs without having to invest in postsecondary education. What follows is a relatively lengthy excerpt that sheds light on Heaven’s upbringing, which in conjunction to *Excerpt 9* above, was very influential to informing her predisposition toward pursuing postsecondary education (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).
Excerpt 10: Nobody Really Did Anything

A: So what did your dad do? What was, what were parents? What did they do for work?

H: My father worked at Westinghouse--Well, he was in the [military], and then he went to Westinghouse.

A: mm-hm

H: And then when Westinghouse closed, uhm, he did different things, like different trades, whatever he could do just to make ends meet.

A: yeah.

H: But he didn't really have much to worry about because he lived at home. His parents took care of everything.

A: Oh:, so. He was at his mother's house

H: Right.

A: Gotcha! Okay. I didn't, I missed that.

H: Oh, so when my parents divorced when I was a baby=

A: mm-hm

H: =even though him and his father didn't get along, he says, you know, come home, son, come home. My father came home and never left. And my Grandmother said, which was obviously, his mother. She says I'm sorry I didn't push him back out the door, or just told him not to come home. She says it might have made him grow up a little bit more than what he was.

A: Wow!

H: Yeah. (0.2) And they were surprised that his father told him to come home because he would never think that his father would tell him, you know, because they butted heads all the time.

A: Isn't that something? Eh, was he an only son?

H: No, well yeah, the only son. And then he had a sister. They had a boy and a girl.
A: ok

H: And my Aunt never married or had children. So she always lived at home too.

A: Mmm

H: But my Aunt worked for Verizon—well then it was Ma Bell. (0.2) So my Aunt retired from

A: Those were the good days.

H: Exactly!

A: Oh, yeah. Sistah girl=

H: And (I interrupt)

A: and she got to live at home?! Oh yeah! (chuckles)

H: Oh yeah. Well she says she was going to move out, but then=

A: Why would she?

H: She says, she says I was going to move out but then my father didn't want me to. I was like whatever! (0.2) But she never married or had children. She had her boyfriend.

A: Mm-hm

H: My father moved home. He dated off and on. He almost got married again. He asked for the girl's hand in marriage and her father said no. That was the end of that! Uhm, he did go to St. Joe's for a while.

A: Did he really?

H: Yeah. (0.2) I don't know what he was studying. I'm sure it had to be in the business end, but I don't know all his courses but he didn't get a degree or anything.

A: Yeah.

H: He just took courses here and there. Uhm. (0.2) But then, he just did odd and end jobs until he just couldn't work. And then he finally got into security
A: yeah.

H: And then he ended up leaving XXXX. Cause he worked for XXXXXX--which I think was XXXX back then. (0.2) Uhm. And then XXXXX took over. But he worked for them until he couldn't work no more. (0.2) So, I mean, basically (0.3) nobody really did anything. I shouldn't say it that way, but I guess back then in the 80s and 70s--you did what you did. My mother worked for (major company) until she had to retire. Oh yeah, they all worked in good jobs. They all had good jobs.

(Heaven, Interview 1, Lines 1475-1524, 4-23-14)

Although this is a particularly long clip, it is very rich in content in that it reveals Heaven’s understanding of adulthood and the world of work. As indicated, she grew up watching her family obtain jobs that often came with good benefits, and to some degree security, without having to attend college. Hence making postsecondary education appear optional. As Heaven also explained, no one in her family ever pushed her to do school or put any expectations on her in terms of a taking a particular direction in life following high school. This had obvious implications on Heaven from the standpoint of predisposition. It is important to point out, though, that although Heaven was not pressured to further her education beyond high school, she certainly was not dissuaded by her family from this option as a youngster. Despite how she was perceived amongst school officials, her family was quite supportive of Heaven and believed that she possessed the potential to become whatever she wanted to be. However, the social and economic context as Perna (2006, 2013) and other scholars (e.g., Bettis, 1996; Paulsen, 1990; Rose, 2012; Van Horn, 2013) note, appears to have mediated Heaven’s evaluation of the need for postsecondary education. When she came out of high school, one could still find a decent job without postsecondary training.
Heaven reported not working full-time since the birth of her child. But before that, she had jobs in retail after high school, and she worked at a large company doing in-house print and copy production work prior to taking maternity leave. When the company downsized and her position was eliminated soon after she had the baby, she became a stay-at-home mom. Heaven reported occasionally working a part-time job in retail during the holiday season as her only other employment, while her husband worked to support the family through various positions as a security officer. For a short while, she and her husband resided with her father prior to his death.

Heaven stated that at various points during her marriage she entertained going back to school to establish a career, which would have brought additional income into her household. However, she just never followed through. As I mentioned earlier, this was an issue her in-laws often chided her about, citing that she would have been more prepared to take care of herself and her child following her husband’s untimely death.

**Case Summary**

In this case study presentation of Heaven’s postsecondary choice experience, I sought to understand the nuances of her personal journey in arriving at Pyramid Career School, the resources she drew upon in her decision-making process, and the factors that mediated her decision to attend a for-profit institution vs. one of the many not-for-profit options throughout the Philadelphia region. Additionally, I was curious about participants’ sense making of their postsecondary choice. In concluding this chapter, I offer the following summarization of what I learned of Heaven’s journey.
Heaven’s postsecondary choice story, like so many other participants in this research, largely emanates from a crisis standpoint that is, in part, greatly related to the changing U.S. (and world) economy. Having been out of the workforce for almost a decade when she sought employment again in 2013, Heaven quickly realized that the work world had indeed changed— noting for herself that in order to obtain a job, additional education would be required (Carnevale et al., 2013; Perna, 2013; Rosenbaum, 2002; Van Horn, 2013). Hence, the fourth layer of Perna’s (2006) conceptual model regarding the social, economic, and policy context aptly captures this component of Heaven’s decision-making process. The contemporary job market was in stark contrast to what she knew growing up in a household of adults who were able to secure a livable wage with large corporations needing little more than a high school diploma, if that. Therefore, the notion of habitus appeared to be quite influential in shaping Heaven’s thoughts about postsecondary education as a child from a working class background.

Despite her family’s minimal participation in postsecondary education, they were nonetheless supportive of Heaven pursuing this direction. Her father expressed hopes that she would become an attorney and forbade her to attend her school district’s vocational education program in cosmetology. Her grandmother offered to pay for Heaven to attend the local community college en route to Heaven’s expressed desire to become a teacher. Despite these encouraging responses, however, Heaven’s insecurities as a learner were a great impediment to her interest and motivation towards postsecondary education, which remain even today. It became clear through my reading of the interview transcripts that school was not a pleasurable experience for Heaven, nor did she perceive there to be
much encouragement from school personnel to cultivate postsecondary aspirations. McDonough’s (1997) qualitative research on the college choice experiences of four California teen girls, all of whom were white, added the term college choice organizational habitus to frame the phenomenon of how schools shape students’ postsecondary pathways. The way in which Heaven linguistically frames her experience of high school in Excerpt 9 as an outsider, is suggestive of this interplay between institutional cultural practices and an individual’s perceptions of their postsecondary options. Both Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Perna’s (2006) model of “college choice” speak to the role of academic preparation and achievement in forging students’ pathways into postsecondary education. Further, Heaven’s experience aligns with existing research about non-academic and educationally underprepared students’ tendencies to avoid college and actively pursue occupational programs of study instead (Apling, 1983; Bailey & Belfield, 2013; Chung, 2009; Rose, 2012).

Despite the role that Heaven’s academic identity played in her decision-making, she states something else that was interesting: the fact that she had no real push to go to further her education as also central to her avoidance of postsecondary education. As highlighted in Excerpt 9, her high school apparently did not cultivate this direction for her, nor did her peers create any pressure for her to move in this direction. Her family merely presented postsecondary education as an option, but not something she had to do. Therefore, there was no real urgency for Heaven to pursue this route. Yet, retrospectively, Heaven exclaimed that she wished she had been more mature earlier in her life to take advantage of her opportunity to at least earn an associate’s degree from
the community college. Being “coddled” as she put it, has only made things more challenging for her now.

I realized over time that Heaven was really afraid of school. And the idea of having to do school right now came with great anxiety. Hence I assessed that part of her evaluative criteria of a school had much to do with her perceptions of how hard the curriculum appeared and how much support she might be provided. Thus, class size and access to the instructor were real needs and criteria in selecting a school and program. Although Heaven does not explicitly discuss her search process this way, I read through the lines of her story and connected the dots on my own. Pyramid became a viable option because it provided a very nurturing philosophy in its presentation of self. Admissions representatives knew how to arrest students’ fears, while instilling confidence where it had not existed. In my discussion with a few of Jordan’s colleagues, it was clear that they understood who their primary audience was—people needing a second chance, people who were in financial crises, people who knew very little about postsecondary education, and those who may be educationally underprepared or simply unconfident about themselves as learners. Compared to the local community college, Pyramid was indeed a more intimate setting, and the faculty was personable and accessible from what all of my participants described. I only became acquainted with the MBC instructor, who I found to be very skilled at working with adult learners. He dispensed advice to the students and was patient yet demanding of them. In my observation of him working with the students during tutoring hours, he was very motivating, for which the students held him in high esteem.
Heaven, admittedly, did not know a lot about the world of postsecondary education; therefore, she primarily relied on the Internet, the kindness of strangers, and her own intuition and experience in vetting potential schools and programs. Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person’s (2006) research of students attending sub-baccalaureate institutions cite similar findings amongst first-generation college goers who struggle with successfully participating in postsecondary education without the factual information and supportive guidance. Although this might seem a bit haphazard, there is something positive to be said about her strategy of relying on intuition as Amaury Nora’s (2004) research highlights. What became apparent in her story is that Heaven was indeed very knowledgeable of herself and appeared to use this knowledge sensibly in vetting her options in the context of her life situation. Arguably, she may have very well dodged a negative experience at the community college given the numerous critiques that have been written about the marginal success of students completing programs in this setting—particularly when remediation may be involved (Deil-Amen, 2011; Goldrick-Rab, Carter, & Wagner, 2007; Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Rose, 2012). Further, her use of intuition has clear connections to Freire’s (1987) assertions about the act of reading and literacy, broadly construed. In this case, I was able to link how intuition was actually informed by her prior experiences (i.e., framed as “background knowledge” in reading instruction) as she “read” institutions as a good fit for her. Indeed, Pyramid met her expectations on multiple levels. Most of all, she gained confidence in her abilities as a student. Borrowing from Campano and Damico’s (2007) conceptualization of epistemic privilege, I believe that Heaven was interpreting her choices from her own context of social class, ability
level, and time constraints, making this choice appear quite rational and appropriate. In the end, comfort level with the institution trumped cost as long as she could afford to pay for her training.

What comes through in this research is that the influence of our childhood experiences stay with us for a long time. Many of the social and cultural factors shaping her predisposition towards postsecondary education remained with Heaven, clearly through adulthood. This is not all that surprising. All the forces of her youth appeared to continue to mediate her postsecondary decision-making in the present. However, with the force of a critical incident occurring in her life (i.e., the death of her husband) amidst the context of a changing economy, Heaven’s predisposition toward postsecondary education was altered. This experience has not only had an impact on Heaven personally; it has also impacted the outlook she has for her child regarding postsecondary education. Heaven asserted that she has made college a priority for her child, with whom she is already actively discussing career plans and 4-year college options.

Lastly, Heaven’s scenario also spoke loudly to me about the importance of maintaining the enormous diversity in postsecondary education we enjoy in the United States. People are not the same, and they really do need different environments to support their learning goals and educational needs. One size does not fit all, as all of my participants’ cases appear to underscore. And even though price is a big consideration in selecting an educational experience, appropriate decision-making cannot be reduced to a simply a matter of cost.
As with the other participants’ chapters, in brief, below I provide a list of the major factors influencing Heaven’s decision to enroll at Pyramid. Additionally, a list of elements that did not appear to influence Heaven’s decision making follows.

**Table 5**

*Factors Influencing Heaven’s Choice*

- Her negative assessment of her academic ability
- The short term nature of the program—seeking non-degree occupational training expressly
- Travel distance to school
- Having a positive encounter with the school’s admissions counselors
- The changed economy which now required postsecondary education to earn a livable wage
- Access to financial aid
- Classes convenient to her parenting responsibilities

*Note:* This should not be considered an exhaustive list.

**Table 6**

*Factors Appearing to Have Less Influence on Heaven’s Postsecondary Choice*

- Price/cost
- School reputation or accreditation
- Institutional designation as a for-profit vs. non-profit school

*Note:* This should not be considered an exhaustive list.
CHAPTER SIX

MY WAY: THE STORY OF GERVAIS

Yeah, I wanted to improve my life. (Gervais, Interview 1, Line 99, 6/18/14)

I just figured school was my best option. I needed to stop thinking like somebody who’s answering the questions of his teachers and mom and start thinkin’ about what I want to do.

(Gervais, Interview 1, Lines 169-171, 6/18/14)

Prologue

On June 18, 2014, I had the first of three interviews with Gervais, a 28-year old African American man, who is single and without children. Gervais was working part-time while attending the massage therapy program at Pyramid Career School, which he began in February 2014. Gervais is somewhat tall (at least 6 feet) with a medium body build. When we met, he was wearing a set of blue scrubs—the standard uniform for students at the school. He informed me that he had a job interview at 2 p.m., so I was mindful to watch the clock during this first session. Gervais was the last of my interviewees for this research. It had been over a month since I had returned to Pyramid. My original goal was to interview 6-10 students, and already I had interviewed six people at Pyramid. I do not know what prompted me to ask Jordan to seek out another participant for the study. I guess I figured that I should take full advantage of the access I had worked so hard to get, and the rationale of “one more for good measure” seemed to also inspire me.

10 Ordinarily, I avoid describing participants physically. After reading other studies where people described participants, I became somewhat turned off from this practice. I only make reference to Gervais’s physical traits here because it was something that he reiterated in describing his lived experience leading to Pyramid.
I had been fairly busy running around doing interviews for a separate project, and was actually feeling a bit overwhelmed. Momentarily, I thought about cancelling my interview with Gervais, whom I had not even been introduced to yet. When I reconnected with Jordan in early June, he readily agreed to identify another participant for my study; therefore, I felt obligated to go through with the interview since he made the effort on my behalf (for which I was very appreciative). In the middle of my interview with Gervais, I thought to myself, “Thank God you kept this interview!!!” for Gervais, too, offered a unique and interesting story of postsecondary choice amongst the other participants’ stories. He was considerably younger than the other participants in this study, and actually within the age group that I initially anticipated I would encounter for this study. Hence I was very interested in hearing his perspective.

It was something of an awkward introduction when I first met Gervais. Jordan led me to a different meeting space than where I had been interviewing participants before. Gervais was already in the room waiting for me when I arrived. Jordan made a quick introduction and immediately left the room. I took over and explained what my study was about, and assured Gervais that it was completely voluntary for him to participate. In a nonchalant manner, he shrugged and said that he had no problem participating in my study. I gave him the consent form and contact sheet to complete, and asked him again if he had questions about anything and if he still felt comfortable with participating. Although it is difficult to explain, I got the impression that Gervais was not quite sure what I was doing and why he was being asked to participate, so I reiterated that he did
not have to do the interviews. He asserted that he was fine with talking to me and that he had no questions as indicated in the transcript excerpt below:

*Excerpt 1: The Introduction*

A: So did you have any questions or anything (0.2) about any of this

G: (waives head no)

A: (0.3) It's all voluntary You don't have to obviously do it

G: No::: I didn't have any questions

A: Okay (0.3) Alright, I wasn't sure if Jordan had given you any of this stuff (0.2) cause I left copies of stuff—so he might of just trashed them after a while (0.2) cause I haven't been back in some time (0.3) Uhm (0.2) But I'm wondering if maybe you could just start by telling me what brought you back to school.

(Gervais, Interview 1, Lines 10-17; 6/18/14)

Gervais was reserved. Based on his quiet gaze, which he maintained throughout Interview 1, I got the sense that he was assessing who I was, which made me feel somewhat self-conscious. During the second interview, he seemed much less reserved and a bit more lively in our discussion. In both instances I sat across from him with my legs crossed in a chair and wrote notes on a tablet resting on my right thigh. Generally, Gervais’s body language suggested that he was comfortable and that he was in a familiar space, for he slouched in his chair behind a teacher’s desk and titled his head back as he responded to some of my questions. I read his behavior as suggesting that I was perceived as nonthreatening and somewhat unimportant. Gervais also spoke slowly and deliberately as he responded to my questions, which I interpreted to be very thoughtful and sincere responses given the content of what he shared. In my position as an interested listener, I believe that Gervais saw the interviews as an opportunity to talk about things that he had
not really had an invitation to discuss before but were indeed of concern to him. As such, he provided very generous responses to my questions, the content/essence of which remained consistent across our conversations.

As I engaged in other conversations with Gervais during Interview 2 and in a follow-up phone call in November 2014, it was clear to me that he was indeed very introspective about the circumstances of his life amidst the larger world. Often, his micro-stories in this larger tale reverberated with the realities reported by and about many other young black men in America who are challenged by the combination of their race and gender. In the course of our conversation, lots of bells and whistles were set off in me, for Gervais’s critiques of non-profit education resonated with the growing tension I was noticing around the entrepreneurial nature of contemporary postsecondary education as a whole.

What follows in this chapter is my re-storying of Gervais’s postsecondary choice account arranged according to the themes that emerged in his particular experience. As a reminder, readers should note that this retelling is composed of various segments of five conversations I had with Gervais, hence the order in which the story flows is my own construction of the “facts” that is loosely aligned to Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-stage model consisting of the following phases: predisposition, search and choice. This chapter is drafted from 45 pages of interview transcripts; my notes from conversations I had with Gervais in November 2014, April 2015 and May 2015, as well as other journal entries; and lastly, information taken from a Qualtrics survey Gervais completed in July
2014. Finally, Gervais was invited to review my construction of his story to provide editorial feedback, which he responded to positively.

“I never like school—never ever”
Predisposition and Other Background Factors

Prior attending Pyramid Career School, Gervais had enrolled in a community college for four semesters and completed another year and a half at one of Pennsylvania’s public universities. Gervais’s assessment of his initial foray into postsecondary education was that of a very reluctant participant. Although he had lots of guidance and support in this direction from school and home, he reported hating school since childhood and merely felt obliged to attend college immediately following high school as described in this first excerpt below:

Excerpt 2: I didn’t have a choice…So, I picked something

G: And it was a major I picked back in high school because everybody said so want do you want to go to school for? (0.3) And they they literally waited for me to pick something. So I picked Something, you know?

A: Who’s everybody?

G: Uhm. My teachers, my mom

A: Mm-hmm

G: I still don’t think I was ready to continue education after high school but everybody around me made it sound like I didn't have a choice

A: Mm-hmm

G: So I went to (0.2) I started going to school at [Community College]

A: mm-hmm
G: And then transferred to [public university], but I really didn't like it and I don't think it was time for me to go back to school and I think I wasted a lot of time and money (0.3) Uhm (0.3)

A: Did you go straight from high school?

G: Yeah!

A: (okay) So, did you start at XXXXX—XXXX first

G: XXXXXX

A: Oh XXXXXX (I laugh) Thank you, (I laugh) I struggle with the XXXXX so you went straight there.

G: Mm-hmm

A: Uhm:: what did you major in?

G: Computer Science

A: Okay, so did you finish (0.3) your associate's there or did you just use it as sort of a launching point

G: (0.5) I (0.4) this is kind of startin' over

A: mm-hmm

G: Uhm…cause nothing that I took could transfer here anyway. (0.3) Uhm. (0.4) It was just a startin’ point (0.4) I was goin’ to school (0.5) to keep the people around me off of my back.

A: mm-hm

G: I chose computer science because (0.4) I wanted to make a lot of money. That's all I knew

A: Mm-hmm

G: but I didn't know how I wanted to do it

A: yeah

G: But I was forced to pick something
A: yeah

G: So, I picked something

(Gervais, Interview 1, lines 29-64, 6/18/14)

Gervais’ journey to Pyramid Career School is an interesting tale in that he rejected the traditional college pathway despite having an abundance of support and guidance to pursue that direction. Although he voiced that he felt pressured to attend college following high school in the two formal interviews that I conducted with him in June, for whatever reason the real magnitude of this pressure did not sink in for me until I spoke with him again in November 2014. Some of this undoubtedly had to do with the time and distance in which I first heard the account. Nonetheless, on this occasion he performed a verbal reenactment of the conversation that transpired between himself, his mother and his guidance counselor. The November conversation was not audio-recorded, but I documented the conversation in my journal as follows:

At a meeting in his 12th grade, his mom and school counselor sat at a table with him at the head of it to discuss his next steps. Rather than asking “if” he wanted to go to college, he says they simply asked him “what do you want to major in.” It was at this point he felt he had no choice in deciding his future, so he reluctantly went to the community college to study computer science—something he detested. Only now is he truly ready to do school, and on his own terms. After this conversation, I think my choice of title for his story, “My Way” is apropos.

(A. Flack, Journal entry, 11/22/14)

The material difference between Gervais’s narration of events in June vs. November was in how he positioned himself in this flashback and the way in which he used ventriloquism to portray others involved in this discussion (Wortham, 2001). Rather than just a narration of what happened, it was a performance. It was at this point that the
gravity of how he felt about being pushed into postsecondary really resonated with me and reawakened my concerns about the detriment the “college for all” movement could mean for some students (Carr, 2013; Rosenbaum, 1997, 2001; Rosenbaum et al., 2006). In many circles, this is a dangerous thing to acknowledge; however, Gervais is not the first young person whom I have encountered that wandered through higher education before he was actually ready. His case highlights that there is something to be understood about maturation and personal readiness when it comes to postsecondary education, and the need for college access workers to temper their approach when working with differently situated students. Undoubtedly, Gervais used a significant portion of his financial aid eligibility during this period of “forced” participation when these precious resources should have been reserved for when he was truly ready to further his education. Scholars (e.g., Adelman, 2006; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005) highlight the importance of beginning postsecondary education immediately following high school graduation as a significant factor of bachelor’s degree completion. Cases such as Gervais’s underscore the potential negative effects of this stock response to individuals’ pathways into postsecondary education and problematizes the emphasis on bachelor’s degree attainment for all, whether or not they want it.

Repeatedly throughout the interviews, Gervais described hating school. The only time that he recalls enjoying learning was when he took a college-level independent studies course in mathematics. Given that several scholars (e.g., Adelman, 1999, 2006; Perna, 2013; Rosenbaum, 1997, 2001) have noted a positive correlation between early academic achievement and later successful participation in postsecondary education, I
was curious about what learning factors contributed to Gervais’s negative outlook on furthering his education. Although he reported having a contentious relationship with his teachers because of his refusal to complete assignments and homework, Gervais actually thought of himself as a capable student.

*Excerpt 3: Academic Self-Concept*

A: How do you feel like as a student? Like academically. Do you feel like, you know--you're a good student, bad student. Do you have any--

G: --I feel like I'm a great student

A: okay

G: uhm. (0.6) As a matter of fact, I feel like (0.4) they could up the difficulty of the classroom a little bit. That would probably make me hate it less. Cause, I-I kind of feel bored.

A: okay

G: The-the amount of time they take to teach us things is too s:-too slow to me. I'm not saying that to brag, but I just feel like come on. Like can we move on to the next thing already.

A: Is that because of classmates maybe not gettin’ it or is that just the way things are?

G: It appears to me like just the way things are everywhere. They just take their time with stuff. Not so much the classmates, but more like they choose a pace that they think is optimal.

(Gervais, Interview 1, Lines 654-665, 6/18/14)

Rather than his dislike of school being attributed to learning challenges or a lack of exposure to quality academic courses, Gervais’s response centered on his grade school and early middle school social experience in a much less affluent school district than where he graduated from. He narrated his former troubled school district as being a
holding place for students—akin to a babysitting space where little in the way of meaningful teaching and learning took place. He described his former peers as “chest-beating” bullies, whose only concerns were wearing the right gear and owning the popular item of the day. He, in contrast, was a different kind of child with seemingly different family values. Hence he found himself literally fighting to survive school—a place he was mandated to attend. Although Gervais’s time in a more affluent school district later was much more favorable, he still never developed a love of school. This notion of school being a forced experience in his life was persistent throughout Gervais’s talk about education, and undoubtedly shaped his thinking when selecting Pyramid. Although I do not have evidence of Gervais’s performance as a student, he mentioned that he had made the Dean’s list while enrolled at the Community College, which seemed to serve as another turning point in his relationship with school. He indicated that he actually became less resistant in completing his assignments.

Excerpt 4: I Never Like School—Never Ever

A: Did you dislike school like in high school?

G: yes

A: okay, and even [before that]

G: [I never like] school--never ever

A: wow!

(Gervais, Interview 1, Lines 184-188, 6/18/14)

Having such an early opposition to school made Gervais’s relationship with his mother a contentious one for she was described as a staunch advocate of following society’s rules as indicated in Excerpt 5 below. This, of course, included earning a
college degree, as she had done. As should be apparent throughout this chapter, the college for all discourse was indeed prominent in Gervais’s upbringing, which made his story representative of the scenario that informed my interest in conducting this research and why I was so enthusiastic about my interviews with Gervais. He actually represented the archetype I had imagined for this study. The following excerpt comes from a segment in our conversation about his mother’s own trajectory and how Gervais believes she could have been even more successful in life had she taken more chances. (As a side note, my assessment of Gervais’s mother was that she was very accomplished as he described her as having a long career with a utilities provider, from which she was able to retire early and purchase a retirement home out of state, in addition to maintaining the home she owned in the Philadelphia region.)

Excerpt 5: Head-Butting with Mom and the System

G: So, I think she just came from that time and place where, uhm, religion was a big deal. You went to church every Sunday. If you disrespected your elders, everybody in the neighborhood would whoop your butt. Uhm. Her dad was in the [military], so they traveled around a lot. They even lived [abroad] for a little while.

A: Get out!

G: And, so I guess the way she was brought up, she was also the middle child out of XX. Uhm. Uhm, they didn't have Google back then.

A: yeah

G: So if you had a question you asked your parents. And your parents would tell you the answer, or they would say to ask the preacher. And the preacher would just say have faith in God. So, they, they couldn't really broaden their decision-making process back then. I think that's just the way she was raised--to just do as you're told, or you'll get lost in the wind. Nowadays, me
and my sister, we grew up with computers. We grew up with new ideas from all around the world at the tip of our fingertips on our keyboard. So, we were able to be exposed to these new ideas, see if they conflict with the ideas that our Mom suggested to us, and then present them to our Mom.

A: Mm. (pause) pretty good

G: And then it generated resentment when my Mom said "This is my house, you do what I say," instead of sittin’ and thinkin’ and takin’ it into consideration.

(Gervais, Interview 2, Lines 707-726, 6/23/14)

The excerpt above, as well as several other segments of my interviews with Gervais, suggests that there was a serious generational struggle going on between him and his Mother. I got the sense that he was a defiant child—or at least he tried to be because she seemed to win the battle in getting Gervais to do what she wanted him to do, at least minimally. Gervais’s statement, “it generated resentment when my Mom said ‘This is my house, you do what I say,’” underscores that they simply did not see eye to eye on many things, and seemingly still do not agree on much now. In describing his decision to pursue massage therapy, Gervais frames it as a form of “risk” taking and as something his mother is opposed to.

The Decision to Leave Higher Education Behind

As described in the interview excerpt that follows (and earlier), Gervais’s entrance into computer science was a haphazard decision, and consequently a goal that he was not truly committed to working hard at. He remarked that his transition into the university came with increased costs. Therefore, in order to pay for school he wound up having to work a lot of hours as a security guard overnight, which eventually wore him
down physically. Before long he realized that he was putting forth a lot of time, energy, and money for something that he really did not want to do. Lastly, he was irritated by his reading of higher education as just another money-making enterprise that did not truly care about his success. (An ironic commentary given that he did not have such a view of Pyramid—a for-profit institution!) I found this excerpt particularly interesting in how Gervais makes sense of his participation in education along the lines of whether it is a legally mandated requirement. From my standpoint, this provided deeper insight into the nature of the struggle his mother must have had with getting him to attend school as a child. It further adds to the verity of his conviction that he truly hated going to school.

After spending what he described as over three agonizing years between a community college and a four-year public university, Gervais simply checked out. Gervais’s most recent engagement with postsecondary education, however, resulted from a long and frustrating journey of trying to establish himself in adulthood without formal education or training in a specific area. At this juncture of his life, he has entered postsecondary education on his own terms and for his own purposes: to become an entrepreneur. The next fairly long passage describes how he came to the conclusion that he needed to return to school.

**Excerpt 6: School is a Necessary Evil**

A: What did you really want to do when you came out of high school?

G: I didn't know. I had no clue.

A: Did you have a plan, an alternate plan rather than go to school.

G: No
A: So, it was just like, okay, schools the next thing. I'm just gonna roll with it.

G: If it was up to me, I would've just stayed home and played video games.

A: Yeah, but you can't do that.

G: Can't do that. And I knew that back then.

A: okay

G: Which is why I said alright, fine, I'll go to school. (sounded very disappointed in this decision)

A: So what are your own perceptions about education? Because your mom sounds like she has some pretty strong leanings. And you sound like you have your own perception. I'm not really clear, and I don't want to put words in your mouth, but how would you describe your own understanding of—we'll stick in the realm of just postsecondary education?

G: I see it as a business. Uhm. I started looking at it as a business when I was going to school for computer science, and I saw how, uhm, my curriculum would change. I would log on to their little system and see new classes added to my curriculum, and it looked to me like they just wanted my money. And the more classes I was forced to take in order to graduate, the more classes I had to pay for, the more money they would make. And so I started thinkin': They just trying to take my money, you know. Ain't nobody got time for this. Uhm. It wasn't like in high school when you were forced to go. And since you had to be there, you didn't have to act like you cared. Because if you--because you, you were gonna go whether you cared or not. It was the law, you know. In college, you're not forced to go. It's not the law that you be there. So, if you don't care, you don't have teachers that try and sit with you and work with you. It's not their priority to care about your education. It's their priority to take your attendance and make sure you pay the tuition every month.

A: mm-hmm

G: And so, I started to realize school was a business. Uhm. I started to realize that I did not want to be there. They're getting my money for something I don't even want. Uhm. That's when I started thinking I'd rather work than go to school. And then, once I worked and realized that work isn't paying off as well as I would like it to. I realized that I'd--if I go back to school I need to pay for something that I'm interested in and that I want to learn. And that I have to give them money for
something I actually want instead of just being complacent to what is expected of me.

A: m-hm

G: And, and uhm, just being worked by the system.

A: ok

A: So you took some ownership of your own like (0.3) path—like your

G: mm-hmm

A: It's reluctant that you came back to school, but you kind of=

G: =I see it as a necessary evil

A: It's a necessary evil. Okay.

(Gervais, Interview 2, Lines 684-726, 6/23/14)

An interesting aspect of Gervais’s story is the maturation process that he describes above. I have noted in my work with a number of undergraduate students the importance of a shift in their thinking about school being an active personal commitment rather than something they passively engage in as part of a legalized social requirement. Gervais had this awakening at the university that postsecondary education is a much different animal from K-12 education, and that if he were to remain there, he had better find a real reason for doing so. In the end, the trials and tribulations he experienced in the work world provided the basis in which Gervais developed ownership of his postsecondary education trajectory.

**I Had to Take Control Myself**

As indicated in the above excerpt, in the time between leaving the public university and starting the massage therapy program at Pyramid, Gervais had a very
frustrating experience of trying to enter the world of work. Notably he recounted several stories that featured a heightened awareness of himself as an African American man trying to get ahead in an economy driven by business leaders whom he read as not having an interest in his future. As with most of the participants of this study, Gervais’s reading of the contemporary labor market reflected that the rules of the workplace had changed dramatically since the onset of the Great Recession in 2007, and that, generally, rules of the past in getting ahead in life no longer applied to workers in the new economy. 

Excerpts 6 and 7 feature snippets of instances in which this theme came up repeatedly in our conversation.

*Excerpt 7: That’s not fair*

G: And so I was thinkin’ that’s not fair. I decided I wanna be in charge of how much money I make. I wanna be able to start my own business. I don’t—I’m tired of getting these jobs where you start at the bottom and ten years later, you will be in the same spot.

A: mm-hmm

G: There’s no moving up. Umm. So it was just something…I realized that in order to improve my situation in the world, I had to take control myself.

A: mm-hmm.

G: and I can’t wait on some company to give me a promotion because promoting me may not even be what they hired me for…

(Gervais, Interview 1, Lines 140-148, 6-18-14)
Excerpt 8: The solution to the problem

G: Uhm, but the main thing was—startin’ my own business. I didn't want some guy in a skyscraper in NY decidin’ that I get less money than I'm worth so that he can have another limousine or whatever.

(Gervais, Interview 1, Lines 454-456, 6-18-14)

During the interviews, Gervais reflected on several unsuccessful attempts to get a job that provided a good income and growth opportunities. Exasperated after having a string of dead-end jobs that failed to offer him a livable wage or a promising future, he slowly came to the conclusion that attending school was a necessity to getting access to the lifestyle he desired. In 2011, Gervais almost returned to school with the organization that Pyramid replaced. Instead, he made an attempt to enter the military that was unsuccessful due to a minor physical impairment. (The attempt to enter the military served as yet another way to circumvent enrolling in school. He appears to be also drawing off the example of his grandfather in getting ahead in life.) When enlistment in the military did not go through, he scrambled to find yet another job. He became a furniture mover temporarily, which he recalled being extraordinarily grueling and exploitive. After three months, he successfully found a retail-related position that he somewhat enjoyed. Still, however, it was just a short time before he realized that this job, too, did not have his best interest in mind. As he was training a Caucasian male new hire, he learned that he was being paid less for doing the same job. He believed the pay differential reflected that employees were paid according to where they lived. His zip code referenced a depressed community whereas his white co-worker’s residence did not. This last scenario seemed to be the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back in
Gervais’s interest in returning to school. This time, however, Gervais had a vision and sense of purpose for why he wanted to be in school.

As he embarked on his plan to improve the direction of his life, Gervais gave thoughtful consideration to what he had learned about himself as a worker and student. These considerations included the awareness of his desire to be active and not sitting down; that he did not want to be in school for a long period of time; and that whatever he decided to do, it would eventually allow him to be his own boss for he was tired of trying to make a way in today’s complicated workforce. Gervais, like many people I interviewed in this research, saw healthcare as a promising place of employment growth. Figuring out where he best fit in this realm was largely determined by his attention to gender and racial representation, length of training, and the type of prospects he could anticipate in the job market. *Excerpt 9* picks up with me inquiring about how he found his way to massage therapy.

*Excerpt 9: It’s...one of the only spots I can fit in*

G: It really is the only thing I can think of that would be interesting for me to do. Uhm.

A: How did you find it though? It's a very particular spot on the continuum of uh, like healthcare.

G: Message therapy. uhm. Well it's a particular spot but for somebody like me, it's kind of one of the only spots I can fit in. How often do you see? When you go to the hospital to visit a loved one is the nurse ever a man?

A: yeah!

G: really?!

A: yeah
G: I've never witnessed such a thing

A: oh yeah! If you do any reading on nursin’, you will find that one of the biggest uhm, issues right now, it has been for a while is when men started to get into nursing it actually created like you know the whole issue with uhm like discrimination between pay and wages and stuff like that. They actually, they actually felt...a lot of female nurses and stuff felt that when men entered the profession actually changed things. Uhm. To some degree it sort of heightened like the reputation of nurses, uhm the pay. There was concern about pay disparities within nursing. There are quite a few males nurses. It probably doesn't overcome the number of female nurses, but their definitely, males have definitely made their mark in the nursing profession. It's very noticeable.

G: mm-hmm. I-I I haven't noticed it. I've, I've visited relatives and the nurse is always a female. It's also my demographic.

A: mm-hmm

G: I'm a male. I'm not a little person. And I'm this color (points to skin), and I think we kind of have a bad reputation. Uhm, and that applies to massage therapy too. But, I chose massage therapy though because (0.5) I can start my own business--my own office.

A: mm-hmm

(Gervais, Interview 1, Lines 427-450, 6/18/15)

This second excerpt illuminates Gervais’s growing understanding of himself, which I believe highlights another important component of postsecondary choice that is under-examined (Freeman, 2005; Weissman, 2012). Gervais’s attention to race and gender were particularly salient factors in this story of postsecondary choice. In each participant’s story in this research, there was emphasis placed on locating oneself in a particular career track based on their likes and dislikes as well as perceptions about their demographic profile in society. Being able to identify with a particular career undoubtedly affects the institutional choice process. The notion of alignment between
self, career, and institutional type are further illustrated in the following transcript clip. It also provides a glimpse of the sense making that informed his decision to pursue massage therapy, and subsequently attend Pyramid Career School.

*Excerpt 10: Figuring Things Out*

A: How did you come to computer science?

G: (.10) I was always more into computers than sports.

A: uh-ha

G: Some people associate...people would tell me oh you're good at computers instead of athletic stuff, so I was thinking maybe my destiny was to be a computer nerd

A: ahhh!

G: But, I didn't like it. I-it just It was boring to me...the classrooms and the sitting there typing Uhm that’s how I decide--that's how I realized I would want to be (0.7) Alright, I'm just gonna say when I was workin’----I would have --I had different jobs over years that I realized I liked the jobs where I'm movin’ around

A: uh huh

G: Rather than the ones where I have to stand still or sit still

A: Mm-hmm

G: Uhm and I like to work with my hands and I realized I was thinkin' about that and I was thinkin’ that's what I need to do something that keeps me movin’ and I can work with my hands

A: Mm-hmm

(Gervais, interview 1, Lines 62-77, 6/18/14)

As reflected in Gervais’s discussion with me above, most participants thoughtfully drew off of their prior life experiences in assessing a new career direction and postsecondary institution. They also relied on the admissions representatives to help
guide them in their decision making of a career track. Perceptions of or prior knowledge about what “colleges” provided in the way of education vs. an institution that touts “hands-on” career training indeed made a difference in Gervais’s institutional choice (Bailey et al., 2001). I question whether Gervais would have even considered his local community college’s massage therapy program had they offered one due to its association to conventional notions of school involving lots of seat learning.

**Search “Google Magic”**

I asked Gervais to describe how he found his way to Pyramid Career School specifically. As many of my participants shared, searching the Internet via Google, was an integral part of his search process. He reported, however, feeling frustrated by the fact that once he gave his contact information in online forms, schools never stopped calling to recruit him. This led to him changing his approach to calling or visiting schools in person to learn about what they had to offer. In the case of Pyramid, he had earlier visited the school that Pyramid replaced, so this was in many ways picking up where he had left off prior to attempting to enter the military in 2011. As we later discussed criteria in selecting a school, Gervais identified distance as a major factor in his decision making since he did not have reliable transportation. Therefore, his search for schools was heavily confined by their distance to his home. When we talked in November, he had enrolled in another school farther from his house following the closure of Pyramid. Speaking from a retrospective stance, he was sorry that he had not been more open to traveling farther for a program. Although he did not trash Pyramid, he felt that his new
school offered a much nicer set up (i.e., a more aesthetically pleasing environment, a more serious body of students in attendance).

Excerpt 11: Information Gathering

A: What types of things did you access in terms of information?

G: A lot of Google magic

A: Google magic!?

G: Yea::h

A: okay. Let your fingers do the walkin’

G: Yup! I actually came here and spoke to one of the--the lady I spoke to doesn't work here anymore, but she talked to me about it. Uhm. When I was workin’ for [current employer], I met a guy who knew somebody who was a massage therapist and he asked her questions for me.

A: really?!

G: yeah.

A: Did you get to talk to her yourself at any point?

G: no

A: Oh, that might have been good (0.4) to do.

G: [ yeah ]

A: [What kind] of things were you asking?

G: uhm. Mainly if it was a good idea. I didn't wanna take up this profession and only to find out it’s, it's just a, what I'd call a toy profession (0.2) not really meant to be taken seriously [you know]
A: [mm-hmm]

G: But they have whole schools for it, you know. If wasn't a big deal, then why would you, why would they have schools for it? Why would you need so many certifications to do massage therapy period? Take tests. Uhm, have to continue your education to increase your knowledge of it and all.

A: So, do you get licensed? Do you have to go for like a licensing?

G: Yeah. At the end of-uhm, at--in January, I complete-complete the classroom and I have to go to clinic, and that's when I actually practice on real clients.

A: mm-hmm

G: and I also will have to take what they call the MBLEx test, and the MBLEx test, if I pass it, is what, then they'll give me certification to practice and make money.

A: Okay. Do you have a uhm, a clinical aspect to this, like a practicum? Like, where you're actually working—cause it is technique a lot of it has to do with technique it is a hands-on learning thing, so, but usually like when a hands-on piece people call 'em a practicum or laboratory or whatever. Do you do that—like now?

G: We go into lab and practice on each other.

A: okay

(Gervais, Interview 1, Lines 293-327, 6/18/14)

Gervais later stated in Interview 2 that ultimately his reliance on Google was the result of really not knowing where else to turn for information about his decision making process. In addition to searching for a school to attend, this clip again demonstrates the significance of career exploration taking place in tandem with Gervais’s institutional search and choice processes. He earnestly tried to investigate massage therapy prior to making a commitment to attend school for it, which included consulting the
Occupational Outlook Handbook; talking to peers, family and colleagues; and referencing his personal experiences. As depicted in Excerpt 12 below, Gervais received very little support from his family in the early stages of his decision making to pursue massage therapy.

Excerpt 12: The Naysayers

A: So, what was the feedback from family and stuff around you when you decided to make this change?

G: I told my. I tried to go into the [military].

A: mm-hmm

G: but uhm, that didn't work out either

A: mm-hmm

G: So then I was thinking okay, I have no choice but to go to school. I told, I told my cousin

A: You really did not want to go to school

G: no

A: you mean that

G: I didn't, I did not. uhm. I have cousins that I spoke to about it and they laughed at me. Massage therapy kind of has a seedy reputation. A massage therapist and a masseuse are not the same thing.

A: oh really!? I guess, I mean, I guess I-I wouldn't know to make the distinction.

G: A masseuse. it's, it's not really the real definition, but the way people think about it.

A: I think of... ok

G: a masseuse gives happy endings
A: really?!! This is what (. ) I never heard of that distinction. I thought it was different, different ways...I don't know. I don't know.

G: A masseuse--well uhm, first of all, a masseuse is a female masseur. A masseur is a male massage person.  (A: okay) And you know what a happy ending is? A: yeah! I think I. Yeah. I could put that together. When you think of all your massage parlors, [ so to speak ]

G: [a massage parlor]

A: that they bust for [prostitution]

G: [ exactly ]. When I told them that I wanted to go to school for massage therapy their dirty polluted minds started giggling and laughing. And I'm like, what?! I realized later of what they were thinkin’ about.

A: mmm

G: Uhmm, That kind of made me re-evaluate my decision. Uhm, I spoke to my mom about it, and she wasn't really supportive. Her, her initial reactions was you need to find something that's a real job. She didn't think it was really valid either. She kinda had the same idea about it I had when I first started kicking the idea around.

A: mm-hmm

G: uhm. But then...I had to remind myself that these people don't know everything. Uhm. And I just had to talk to more people about it, do more research and realize that I can't let somebody else's misconception about something control my decision making.

A: mm-hmm

(Gervais, Interview 1, 6-18-14, Lines 388-426)

Although it took some time, Gervais rebounded from his family’s negative reaction and decided to follow his dream secretly (Gervais, personal communication, May 1, 2015). When we met again in May 2015 to discuss the story I had composed about his decision-making process, he corrected my understanding of whom he had actually consulted with in making his final decision. Gervais stated that he did not tell
anyone about his enrollment at Pyramid until well after he had entered the program, and that his mother thought that he was just going to work every day. He added that his father, whom he does not live with, thought that it was a “crazy idea” until he did his own investigation of massage therapy. Hence Gervais’s sense making of massage therapy as a real profession and how the institutions he looked at spoke to preparing him for this career was important, as I will continue demonstrating in the next section that focuses on the circumstances informing Gervais’s decision to enroll at Pyramid.

Factors Influencing Gervais’s Decision to Enroll at Pyramid

In terms of actually committing to attend Pyramid, the following factors emerged as central to Gervais’ decision making: school distance from home; the admission’s representative presentation of Pyramid’s program; the length of the program, and seeing a social acquaintance working at the school. After discussing Gervais’ self-described choice criteria, I will discuss the issue of cost of attendance as this commonly arises in people’s decision-making about postsecondary education, and particularly in regard to for-profit institutions.

Distance

Gervais voiced that he had very strict parameters about where he would travel to attend school. Mainly this had to do with his car not being reliable. Secondly, there were just some locations he did not feel comfortable traveling to due to environmental factors (e.g., dislikes inner city driving). He reviewed a couple programs advertised as distance
learning, but quickly crossed them off the list once he learned he would have to travel out of state to complete the practicum portion of the program.

Excerpt 13:

G: I looked at all the schools around me that I could go to...this one was the closet one that also offered a program that I was interested in...Umm, so I decided to come here

A: okay, sooo,  

(Gervais, Interview 1, Lines 94-96, 6-18-14)

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Excerpt 14:

G: I really chose the school because the proximity was a big deal to me.

A: yeah

G: My car is...uhm..it's, it just, it just, it's not a--I don't like drivin’ it. I don't like driving to begin with. So let alone my car that is--it looks nice, but it's really just a junker. So I don't like to put miles on it. I like to just move up in life and replace it...

A: okay

G: ...with something that is not falling apart around me.  

(Gervais, Interview 2, Lines 352-358, 6/23/14)

Admissions Presentation

Gervais described Pyramid’s admissions approach as very appealing. Although I did not get to witness his intake experience, I got to see how admissions representatives interacted with other students who came to the school during my visits. They were very friendly and courteous to potential students. Further, each of the other participants of this study noted how comfortable they felt in talking to the admissions representatives about their interests and goals in regard to returning to school. Admissions representatives often
took on the role of a trusted friend and counselor in affirming students’ desires to do better and in helping them to identify a path for achieving their dreams. Hence they were sincere and validating in their approach. In a conversation that I had with two of Jordan’s admissions colleagues, they revealed that they saw Pyramid’s purpose as providing a second opportunity to students. It is difficult to assess the genuineness of their commitments given my positionality in this context; however, my gut reaction was that both women really had good intentions to help others as one drew lines to her own life experiences in the work that she was doing and the other provided sympathetic accounts of how the institution supported students in crisis. Ultimately, Gervais stated that he was sold on Pyramid’s program due to the admissions representative’s thorough and reassuring presentation of their massage therapy program as described in the excerpt below:

**Excerpt 15: Sold!**

A: Yeah! So: (0.2) you had the literature there. You talked to people. Uhm. Anything else? Anything about you scrutinizin’ the school like were there certain things you looked for in terms of what they offered in this program or any program?

G: I mainly listened to how they talked.

A: ok

G: I was kind of turned off by all the uhm websites that clearly wanted to blow my phone up and sell me this and sell me that. "Oh you could go to this school." Uhm: (0.3) all the people calling me constantly asking me if I was lookin’ to continue my education. It all looked like a capitalist scheme to me

A: mm-hmm
G: And so when I came to the schools, or when I talked to them on the phone, I listened to what it sound like they were saying. Did they sound like people just capitalists—tryin’ to sell me something that they didn't care would work or not. Or did they sound like a school who was really interested in performing the duties that an education institution is supposed to perform.

A: mm-hmm

G: And, they sounded here like they really--like they really had a plan for how they were gonna educate me in massage therapy and and what would happen after I graduated and stuff.

A: Okay, and so what was that? How was that explained --to you?

G: They said uhm they had a lot of connections in the industry. They can help me get a job. They can help me with my resume. Uhm. Once I'm finished classes I would go to clinic and practice on real customers, learn the business, learn how to keep books, uhm. They told me that massage therapy is a real profession. I told them about how my mom said she didn't think it was a real job and they said it's a real job, it's a real profession.

A: Oh yeah, it's a real

G: We'll teach you how to make money with it. We'll show you all of that. Uhm, they didn't just say, uhm. Learn massage therapy; give us your credit card number. You know.

(Gervais Interview 2, Lines 464-493, 6/23/14)

Program Length

In the interviews, Gervais shared a compelling string of stories about the difficulties he had in trying to acquire a decent paying job, which echoed just how constrained the job market had become since 2007. He desperately wanted to improve his circumstances, and quickly. Gervais had ascertained that the route to overcoming a precarious employment situation was to become an entrepreneur. Therefore, the length of
training was clearly a significant factor for Gervais in selecting Pyramid Career School, for life was essentially on hold until Gervais could begin practicing as a massage therapist. Further, as returning to school was viewed as “a necessary evil,” the sooner he could complete a program of study, the better. Gervais also made reference to the length of training required in other healthcare positions as he described his selection of massage therapy as a career pursuit. The program of study at Pyramid Career School was only 12 months.

A Friend in the Business

An interesting component of this story is that Gervais happened to notice Jordan during his visit to check out Pyramid. Apparently, they had become acquainted in another social context previously. Although Gervais contends that Jordan did not influence his decision to attend Pyramid, seeing someone that he knew working there gave him confidence in his decision to enroll there.

*Excerpt 16: Hey! I know you.*

A: So: (0.2) knowing that Jordan was here did you did you know that like while you were making your decision?

G: No

A: Okay, so that didn't do anything to influence

G: Nope! I was gettin’ a tour from Eden. She was the person who was signing me up initially.

A: mm-hmm

G: And I'm we're walking down the hallway, and I don't know why I turned around but I turned around and Jordan was behind me, but I didn't recognize him at first. I was like that dude looks familiar (0.2) and I turned around again, and I
recognized him. Like ohhh! And then Eden said okay, well since you guys know each other, you guys--you give him the tour and stuff. So.

A: So, did that make you feel more confident about your choice? Or you had already pretty much=

G: =I had already pretty much made my decision, but seeing as how I know Jordan, I think that had an influence on my uhm in my trust in them (Pyramid).

A: okay

G: Why would Jordan lie to me? He's my friend.

(Gervais, Interview 2, Lines 260-277, 6/23/14)

Cost

One of the loudest arguments against for-profit education is its cost. Various scholars, education advocates, and policy makers continually try to make sense out of why students are willing to pay more for programs at for-profit institutions when they can likely find comparable or perceivably better programs at community colleges. Given the pervasiveness of this argument, I made sure to ask students about their perceptions of the cost for their programs of study as many never brought up the issue of cost on their own. Gervais, similar to all participants of this study, did not express any real concern about cost of attendance. From what I gathered, the programs were packaged in a way that made them seem very affordable. Often students cited having to pay $80 per month on a private loan while they attended, and the balance of any federal loans following graduation.

Excerpt 17: Price

A: How much is the program?

A: Is yours-Yours is like a year, right. You have a full year.
G: yeah

G: I wanna say $15,000

A: mm-hmm. Does that cover everything?

G: Yeah. That's what I want to say, but I'm not entirely sure.

A: okay

G: My financial aid, uhm, (pause 0.10) took a big chunk out of uhm what I paid directly out of pocket. Yeah, I think I wanna say $15,000.

A: You don't know? (chuckle)

G: I'm not entirely sure.

A: Okay, I'll leave it alone.

G: Yeah. I don't really get too hung up on the price, just the end result.

(Gervais, Interview 2, Lines 494-506, 6/23/14)

Gervais appeared unphased in his response about the issue of cost. From his standpoint, he was willing to pay for something that he really wanted, and indeed he was invested in the idea of becoming a massage therapist. Pyramid provided a product that suited his interests and it was accessible to him through the assistance of financial aid. In my conversations with participants, education appeared to have little distinction from any other commodity a person wants or needs and is willing to pay for. Gervais viewed this educational experience as providing him what he needed to make his entrepreneurial dreams a reality. Lastly, it was priced affordably and came with an agreeable payment plan via educational loans. In comparison to what one would pay for one year of full-time study at many of the private area colleges and universities ($30,000-$50,000), Pyramid’s cost of attendance appears quite reasonable.
Finally, in his response to my Qualtrics survey, Gervais indicated that his decision-making included reading program disclosures provided by Pyramid Career School, such as gainful employment information. This is consistent with how he described investigating his entry into the field of massage therapy. He also stated that he checked the U.S. Department of Education Database of Accredited Institutions and Programs. Although not directly related to school choice, he also consulted the Department of Labor’s *Occupational Handbook Guide* to help solidify his decision to pursue a career in massage therapy as he wanted to verify that it was a real profession. This information was helpful in his ability to filter information he received from schools about their training programs.

**Case Summary**

The quotes I featured at the opening of Gervais’s chapter seem to aptly summarize the realities of his experience with education throughout his whole life—meaning it had always been somebody else’s agenda but not his own. Gervais’s first postsecondary choice experience was indeed embedded in the college-for-all movement (Carr, 2013; Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010, Domina, Conley, & Farkas, 2011; Rosenbaum, 2001), although he himself did not make that association. I found Gervais’s story striking in that prior to attending Pyramid Career School, he attended two public, “not-for-profit” institutions for approximately 3.5 years, which he ironically assessed as being out to take his money as opposed to the “for-profit” institution he was attending, which is socially constructed by prevailing discourses as the only culprit of such behavior. Presumably, Gervais possessed a lot of knowledge about the world of postsecondary education based
on the fact that his mother was a college graduate; second, he attended an affluent, suburban middle school and high school that promoted a college going culture; and third, he actually spent two years at a community college and a year at one of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education universities. Despite these factors, he still perceived himself as not knowing as much as he needed to know about pursuing postsecondary education as indicated in his response to my Qualtrics survey: “I didn’t know about the above resources and I don’t know how someone as clueless as I was would have found out about them.” (Refer to the Qualtrics survey in Appendix B)

Gervais’s story also underscores the importance of maturation and readiness to participate in postsecondary education. As I was examining each participant’s story of postsecondary choice, I sought to understand the larger meanings associated with not only their decision to attend school, but Pyramid in particular. Given the circumstances Gervais elaborated on in his interviews with me, “My Way,” seemed to be an apropos title to describe his postsecondary choice journey to Pyramid Career School. His initial resistance to postsecondary education should not have been ignored, although I understand the reason why he was pushed to continue his education. He never wanted to college after high school but literally felt forced to. This stance undermines the very notion of choice altogether.

As for his decision to enter Pyramid, my analysis of the transcripts suggest that a convergence of factors contributed to this outcome—the first of which being a poor job market for people without definitive knowledge and training in something. This theme was pronounced in what Perna’s (2006a) highlights regarding the “social, economic, and
policy context” in layer four of her model (p. 119). At the time of Gervais’s deliberation about his future, the United States, as well as other countries around the world, was still reeling from the verge of an economic collapse. In many regards, the economic situation has yet to substantially improve, resulting in lots of Americans trying to figure out their footing in a new leaner and highly selective workforce (Perna, 2013; Van Horn, 2013; 2015). To Gervais’s dismay, opportunities to land a decent job without postsecondary education are extremely limited and really a thing of the past. This scenario was the foundation of what I describe as a critical incident informing Gervais’s interest in attending school (—or in Gervais’s case a number of critical incidents). Gervais never really had a career direction, which did not help his employability. And unlike in eras gone by, there is no longer an abundance of well-paying, unskilled jobs available for people without some postsecondary education (Carnevale et al., 2013; Van Horn, 2013, 2015). At the close of interview two, I suggested to him that he meet with an advisor at the community college about applying his credits towards an associate’s degree of any kind. With that much time invested, he should have enough credits between the university and the community college to hobble together for a degree. He appreciated the recommendation and stated that he would look into it. Despite the privileging of the bachelor degrees, researchers have noted that individuals with at least some postsecondary education—particularly in specialized areas of technology or healthcare—are more apt to find employment that provides a livable wage (Carnevale et al., 2013; Crissey & Bauman, 2010; Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010; Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Schneider, 2015)
Another prominent aspect of Gervais’s postsecondary choice experience is his awareness of his demographic profile as a young African American male and how this served as an impediment to his employability despite his efforts to distinguish himself from the negative stereotypes of black men. Van Horn (2013) discusses the saliency of race in explaining the high unemployment rate amongst minority communities, and Freeman (2005) underscores the lack of studies addressing the intersection of gender and race in scholars’ examinations of “college choice” (p. 35). In Freeman’s study, however, she attempted to understand traditional-age African American students’ perceptions of how gender influenced their “college choice” experiences. Her findings align with Gervais’s perspective that African American men are negatively perceived in the larger society, which limits the potential careers they might pursue and subsequently the types of postsecondary institutions (if any) they might attempt to enroll in (Freeman, 2005, pp. 38-39). Finally, Tables 7 and 8 represent a summary of factors that appeared to influence Gervais’s educational decision making.
Table 7

*Factors that Influenced Gervais’s Postsecondary Choice*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Factors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- The economic situation plaguing the U.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- His assessment of his demographic characteristics as a young African American man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- His awareness of his need to be “active and moving around” in a job rather than sitting at a desk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- His interest in becoming an entrepreneur and the prospects of a career in massage therapy</td>
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<tr>
<td>- The length of training required for particular career tracks and their dependency on traditional notions of academic learning, which he disliked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The sincerity of the response and the quality of the information he received from admissions personnel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Distance between home and school.</td>
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*Note:* This should not be considered an exhaustive list.

Table 8

*Factors Appearing to Have Less of an Influence on Gervais’s Postsecondary Choice*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- The opinions of his family</td>
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<tr>
<td>- The college for all discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Program cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Gervais’s academic ability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Note:* This should not be considered an exhaustive list.
CHAPTER SEVEN

THE POSTSECONDARY CHOICE PROCESS OF ADULTS ATTENDING A FOR-PROFIT INSTITUTION: A SUMMARY OF WHAT I FOUND

In the three preceding chapters, where I narrated the postsecondary choice experiences of three of the seven participants of this study (i.e., Don, Heaven, and Gervais), readers will note that I narrated each person’s story in a somewhat different way. This is the result of me allowing each participant’s experience to unfold organically as opposed to me forcing their stories into a predetermined framework (Maxwell, 2013). From an analytical standpoint, such a process allowed me to think openly about the data, which I felt was important in order to learn something new about the context of this research (i.e., the intersection of adulthood, educational aspirations, and selecting for-profit education as an institutional type). Further, this process allowed me to stay very close to the dynamics of each person’s situation. As Don, Heaven, and Gervais’s stories suggest, every person’s story is unique and interesting. Yet, there are still a number of overarching themes within my findings that are useful for practitioners, researchers, policy makers, and potentially interested others to be aware of in supporting the ever-growing population of adults seeking education and training (Bragg, 2015). Hence in this chapter, I will bring into focus what I learned across my interviews with all seven participants of this research as framed by my research questions reiterated below.

1. As college choice has been described as a complex developmental process that takes shape over the course of one’s lifespan, what does this experience look like for adult students, who opt to attend a less than 2-year, non-degree granting, for-profit institution?
1a) What factors mediated students’ decisions to attend Pyramid Career School, a for-profit institution, rather than a not-for-profit institution offering similar educational programs?

1b) What resources do students attending a for-profit institution draw upon in their college choice process?

As previously stated, my analysis of the interview data collected in this study was informed by the college choice models produced by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Perna (2006), both of which are informed by earlier models and research on college choice. Hossler and Gallagher defined college choice as a three-stage process, consisting of phases titled predisposition, search, and choice. The predisposition phase has been theorized as “a developmental phase in which students determine whether or not they would like to continue their education beyond high school” (Hossler & Gallagher, p. 209). The search phase pertains to students’ exploration of schools and programs of study using an array of information (e.g., personal contacts, mentors, institutional literature) that results in a “choice set” of institutions to which they will apply (Hossler & Gallagher). Finally, choice refers to students’ actual enrollment (or not) in a postsecondary institution based on an alignment between students’ preferences and an institution’s offerings (Hossler & Gallagher).

Perna’s (2006) model incorporates elements of various earlier proposed models of college choice, which fall into two primary categories: the economic models of human capital investment and sociological-cultural models. A strength of Perna’s combined-approach model is that it captures not only the perceived costs vs. benefits analysis that individuals are assumed to take up in deciding to pursue postsecondary education, it also takes into consideration several environmental factors that scholars have also identified.
as shaping individuals’ postsecondary education trajectories (Perna, 2006, p. 119).

Perna’s model consists of four layers identified as *habitus; aspects of schools and communities; higher education institutions; and the social, economic, and policy context* (p. 117). At the heart of the model is the proposition that individuals’ pursuit of postsecondary education first begins with an evaluation of the financial resources that are available to finance learning and the degree to which potential students are academically prepared and accomplished (Perna, 2006, p. 117). These last three elements are central to the economic models of human capital investment (Perna, 2006, p. 106-107).

It is important to note, however, that college choice models to date have been constructed upon the experiences of traditional age students only (i.e., those between age 18-23, who enroll in postsecondary education immediately after high school) (Bergerson, 2009; Perna, 2006). And in that context, they have provided an important useful guide in understanding the postsecondary educational trajectory of youths. However, in this research, I sought to explore the ways in which *adults* take up the experience of what I refer to as *postsecondary choice*—a more inclusive term that encompasses sub-baccalaureate education and training. And further, I sought to make sense of students’ pursuit of a less preferred institutional type and a less popular credential goal (Bailey et al., 2002; Revelle, 1997; Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Trivett, 1974). Collectively, these aspects foreground a very different context. Hence my discussion here will speak to the organic themes that arose in my deductive and inductive analysis of participant interview data and other supporting data (e.g., conversations with staff, documents, and artifacts).
Lastly, Riessman (2008) asserts that “A good narrative analysis prompts the reader to think beyond the surface of a text, and there is a move toward a broader commentary” (p. 13). Case-centered research, which narrative inquiry is framed as, holds the potential to illuminate “theoretical propositions,” which may serve as the foundation for others’ work in generating concrete ideas about phenomena (p. 13). Thus, at the conclusion of this chapter, I will discuss a tentative model of the way in which I understand how these particular participants’ engaged in their postsecondary choice experience leading up to their decision to enroll at Pyramid Career School. This model, albeit very preliminary, offers a beginning point to understanding postsecondary choice in reference to adults at a specific moment in time, and at one specific instance of a for-profit non-degree granting institution. The fourth layer of Perna’s (2006) model, offers a productive launching point for understanding postsecondary choice in this specific case of students gravitating to a less-than 2-year for-profit institution, which is where my discussion begins in the next section.

Factors Mediating Students’ Decisions to Attend Pyramid Career School

Critical Incident

One of the consistent themes of this research was that the impetus for these adults to pursue postsecondary education was spawned by an economic crisis (e.g., recession, downsizing, ageism), a health crisis, or both. I termed this situational factor as a critical incident. Revelle (1997) also noted in her research that adults’ interest in enrolling at a for-profit institution often emerged out a crisis situation, although she tempers the interpretation of her finding as being more complex than a single crises situation.
occurring in people’s lives (p. 171). In part, the rationale for Revelle’s tempered interpretation was that attending a degree program was more of a long-term solution rather than an immediate fix to her participants’ problems. Ross-Jones (2006) reported that some of her interview participants also discussed a situation of crisis that influenced their decision to enroll in school, among other reasons (e.g., wanting to change careers, make more money, for their children’s sake) (p. 131).

In my research context, six out of seven participants specifically relayed stories of about difficulty finding work (i.e., everyone but Whilomena). A dovetail to this was that people were looking to reinvent themselves because of the critical incident affecting their lives—which largely had roots to the shifting economy and labor market, as well as recent legislation pertaining to the 2013 Affordable Care Act. This finding clearly relates to the fourth layer of Perna’s conceptual model that emphasizes “social, economic, and policy context” (p. 117). Had the economy been what it was even 10 years ago, it seems that most of my participants probably would not have pursued postsecondary education at this juncture in their lives.

Gervais reported a series of failed attempts to secure gainful employment, and was even prohibited from entering the military due to a slight impairment. He provided a long and critical analysis of the contemporary workforce, citing incidents of perceived racism in hiring, employers manipulating hours and lengths of employment to avoid having to make employees permanent hires and then having to subsequently pay for fringe benefits. After several years of toiling, he came to the conclusion that he needed to become an entrepreneur, and set his sights on becoming a massage therapist.
Heaven experienced the death of her husband and the loss of their home. She was granted Social Security survivors benefits for a limited period of time because she has a minor child. As she has not worked in almost 10 years, she self-assessed that she had few employable skills after a failed job search. Thus, returning to school was perceived to be a necessary next step towards becoming financially independent.

Whilomena had a couple health issues that she was overcoming, which led her to resign from her school bus driver position and permitted her to collect Social Security disability benefits. She spoke of returning to school as a personal goal—stating that she had always wanted to work in the medical field; however, she either did not have the time or money to pursue her desires before. Aside from that, however, she was in what most people would consider a crisis situation: At the time of her interview, she resided in a women’s shelter. Whilomena shared that completing the MBC program at Pyramid Career School was actually one of three goals she established with her social worker. The other two goals were obtaining permanent housing and completing the assistance program that provided her temporary housing.

Similarly, Mack reported having health issues, but believed that he was still well enough to perform the duties of an EMT worker. Over time, he found his hours minimized as an EMT reduced on account of what he perceived to be corporate cost-saving measures. In large part, however, he felt that he had been a discriminated against because of his age. He reported that he had not worked regularly in approximately two years prior to enrolling at Pyramid. He came to the determination that school was his last
hope to become employed again, and mainly via getting exposure to an employer through externship placement.

Vivian left the formal workplace to do private duty, for which she was paid well under the table. When her employer died she had an agonizing time of trying to find new employment. She discovered that she could not return to being a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) because her license had lapsed. Despite having 20 years of experience, she could not work for an agency again without having to invest a lot in retraining for a job she had long tired of. This prompted Vivian to pursue another line of work since she perceived that she had to go back to school anyway in order to re-enter the workforce. A second barrier that Vivian identified was what employers perceived as a “gap” in her work history when she did private duty. Without one year of documented prior work experience immediately preceding the start of a position, she was deemed “unqualified.” At the height of the Recession, rejecting people for jobs because of gaps in employment became common practice amongst employers (Stinson, 2014).

As described in his chapter, Don worked for various security companies as a guard and reported that he was not able to get consistent hours, which made living precarious from the time that he was laid off from the airport in 2008. He returned to school in order to find a new career that would provide economic stability. The healthcare industry became his target after observing others’ experiences around him.

Tamara had been unemployed for over three years before she made a commitment to go to school for retraining. Although she had an associate’s degree and a bachelor’s
degree, she found it virtually impossible to find employment that would compensate her similarly to what she had been earning while working in her former corporate position.

As described above, in most cases it took participants a considerable period of reflection and evaluation about their lives in order to reach the point of coming back to school. The decision to enroll in school often came with time after other options had failed. In essence, school was not usually participants’ first response. For example, Excerpt 1 that follows showcases Vivian’s experience leading up to her decision to pursue training at Pyramid. This excerpt picks up with us talking about the death of her client.

Excerpt 1:

A: So this was so when you stopped--so you stopped service uhm with this one client in 2013?

V: yeah, I-I December, yeah, mm-hm

A: okay, so then uhm—this last year or 2012

V: Yeah 2012, yeah

A: Okay, and so last year you started, and so when did you, when did you actually start the medical billing program

V: I started, uhm July. Uhm, I was doing—tried to do eh, work for myself. Like I did things on the side like catering and stuff that I like-like interior design, and then uhm, a friend of mine got me into the coffee business. But when you got into that stuff, you see that you needed to know more. You know what I mean=

A: Okay

V: =You have to be uhm business savvy, you know what I mean. A lot of them are successful because they already have the, (chuckle) you know, the thing built up to that, so when you're gettin in there you're wastin your money again because you can't--if you can't communicate or you
can't speak the language that they're talking, you're not going to do it. You
know, or you're gonna start it, but you're not gonna finish

A: And what was that about--what did that entail

V: Well, it was very--it entailed uhm you having your own website, your-
your own coffee, like you were--you used their company, but you were
basically your own uhm like an entrepreneur for yourself

A: Okay

V: So they had guidelines, but they didn't--you seen the success, but when
you got out there, you knew that it took more than (laughs) the basics

A: Than how they sold it

V: (Chuckles) Yeah! Than how they sold it, so it

A: Of course

V: So it kind of helped you see through— that kind got me more
motivated in here. I think without that experience, too, I might have
came in here and not completed what I needed to do, but it kinda
helped me see--Hey, I gotta do more, I gotta learn more--even this is a
steppingstone to learning more.

A: mm-hmm

In this account, Vivian highlights that there was indeed a road to her actually
becoming ready to attend school. A failed attempt at being an entrepreneur served as an
important watershed moment in highlighting the skills and abilities that she needed to
develop in order to compete in the contemporary workforce. This failed business venture,
in essence, was important in catapulting her towards school. She not only committed to
doing well at Pyramid, but was already thinking about potentially extending her
education afterward. Vivian’s experience suggests that the “college for all” discourse
reached her in an indirect and experiential manner rather than through any campaign slogans about furthering one’s education.

In most cases, it took participants a year or more before they actually committed to enrolling in school (e.g., Mack, Don, Tamara, Gervais). As such, returning to school was a last-ditch effort to re-enter the workforce, with many participants viewing the externship as an important way to get direct access to employers. Despite this perspective, participants did not believe that Pyramid would guarantee them a job upon the completion of their program, and nor did Pyramid make such promises. In fact, several participants articulated fear about this last ditch approach to getting a job possibly not working out; however, their fears hinged on the state of the job market and employers rather than Pyramid’s ability to prepare them. Their responses echoed what various scholars have noted about many Americans’ growing realization that postsecondary education was no longer a guarantee to economic security (Carnevale et al., 2013; Kelly, 2015; Van Horn, 2013).

The excerpt that follows from my interview with Vivian is suggestive of this point, in which she describes the complexity of obtaining a job in the current economic climate. The excerpt begins with her telling me about how acquiring a CNA job used to take place, in juxtaposition to the challenges of trying to get hired with a gap in her work history now, which she extends to new graduates coming out of programs without work experience.

Excerpt 2:

V: In-house, like I, The Villa (.) it's a good name, but they trained you and you
worked on their floor, then they incorporated you into their business, but uhm, and the thing with that, then they say, even with your license, they want the one year experience. RECENT! Not you have to--did you work the following year? Okay, so, they want--and then they say they didn't care where you worked, just that you had that one year, but I have uh 20 years experience of work, but they wanted to know that one year prior to coming to that job.

A: That sounds [ridiculous to me]

V: [ It really is ] when you--and I'm like, you know, and knowing that the economy is what it is, most people are on unemployment, blah, blah, blah. But they wanted that one year, and it didn't matter the experience because I even talked to a lady. I said, well...they said well we're not asking for this experience per se, but where did you work prior?, you know.

A: So is it more so they want a work history? Or:::

V: I, I think they want a work history--prior that year history to come into the job, so uh, [it's like a lot of,] even people that are training for these jobs, they're coming across, they're coming out=

A: [ That's insane ]

V:=without that one year, it's like you have no experience. So it's, it's, it's

A: That makes no sense

V: Yeah, it doesn't. It really doesn't, but that's where

A: But aren't-isn't there a need though, for people?

V: Yeah! That's what I said there is a need so why don't you do on the job training for these professions--that's how they did it--they basically let you take their classes to be trained, you know what I mean, and then

A: That was the old model

V: And then they trained you in their particular facility, so it's, it's even like a catch-22 comin out so I'm hopin for the best, ya know

(Vivian, Interview 1, Lines 130-161, 4-18-14)

Today people of all ages face a much different employment environment, as Vivian’s account illustrates. Fewer employers offer training, and instead expect future employees to bear the cost of becoming ready to work—a point that Van Horn (2013,
2015) underscores in his national research. This was apparent in what occurred in the case of Certified Nursing Assistants (CNA). In the past, convalescent homes readily hired people to become CNAs without many entry requirements and provided paid training, as Vivian describes above. Her situation corresponds with two other people’s accounts that I am aware of regarding the growing trend of employers divesting in employer-provided training. Hence the adults in this research were making the investment. In some regard, the contemporary labor environment suggests a pay-to-play scheme. If individuals do not invest in postsecondary training, they could be eclipsed from obtaining even the most entry-level jobs in our economy.

**Determining a Career Direction**

Prior to searching for institutions, there was some deliberation that participants typically engaged in about a suitable occupation. First and foremost, the new occupation was vetted on the basis of how long it might take to complete training for it, and in many cases excluded degree programs from the start. Hence, the notion of time to complete was a significant factor in participants’ decision making. In this aspect of their decision-making, participants relied on several resources: the Internet, talking to admissions representatives, and making note of others in their immediate community.

Mack had hoped to build off of his EMT career in resituating himself in different area of the medical field. His process was to rely on the admissions representatives to help him explore his choices. Tamara had a family member that did medical billing. Although she refused to give much credit to her relative for helping her sort out her pathway into the field, it was clear to me that she, in fact, got something out of knowing
her relative’s experience, which included introduction to one of the professional organizations pertaining to MBC. She also discussed using the Internet to explore and compare her school/program choices. Vivian recalled reading about medical billing and coding in a magazine long before she decided to actually pursue it as a career. Her visit to Pyramid helped to solidify her path in this direction, after doing some exploring on the Internet. Don’s career search began with interacting with people within his church community (past and present), in which he learned that there were short-term programs he could complete to get a job in healthcare. Between the Internet and talking to admissions personnel, he too, determined that Pyramid’s medical assistant program was in fact an ideal match for his needs. Whilomena stated that she had always been interested in working in the medical field; however, as she described her process of exploring schools, she actually appeared to have a diffused focus. Several areas were of interest to her, so she evaluated the appeal of programs as she talked to admissions representatives.

Several participants (e.g., Heaven, Gervais, Tamara, and Vivian) shared in the Qualtrics survey and/or their interview that they used the Department of Labor’s online Occupational Handbook Guide to learn more about the careers they were thinking about, which subsequently informed their pursuit of finding an institution that would train them for entry into those occupations.

**Focus on short-term training.** Participants were largely influenced by the short-term nature of the programs, and were very pragmatic about getting training that would lead to re-employment *quickly*. This finding is consistent with other scholars’
understanding of why students select for-profit institutions (e.g., Apling, 1993; Vital-Howard, 2006; Wilms, 1975). All participants needed to stabilize their lives (housing, income, etc.). Approximately four of the seven participants were wrestling with homelessness or being virtually homeless (i.e., Heaven, Mack, Whilomena, Don).

Secondly, people wanted an educational program that would actually lead to something concrete at the end, and not wind up guessing about where and what they could do once they completed the program. Pyramid was described by most participants as being very helpful in showing students their career options. In fact, there was a whole module at Pyramid based on preparing students for the world of work following the completion of their studies. Tamara asserted that such a course be offered prior to people enrolling in a program because it was so informative and could help people better vet their career options prior to enrolling in a program.

Connected to this theme was the way in which students thought of their choice to attend Pyramid. Participants typically expressed their attendance at Pyramid as merely a steppingstone to something else or larger goals they held for themselves. In essence, Pyramid represented a new beginning—a launching point so to speak and not an end within itself. This was a strong theme across 5 of the 7 participants, and an interesting one. In Excerpt 3 that follows below, Vivian narrates how such thinking informing her search decision-making process.

**Excerpt 3**

A: How did you find it? How did you find Pyramid though in the first place?
V: Uh, I-I looked on the web, know what I mean, so I basically looked on the web and knew that uhm I wanted to do something more (.3) sitting down rather than patient care

A: So physical, yeah. Less [physically] taxing

V: [physical, yeah, I-I already did] that so I wanted to do something different. And then I was lookin’ at more, I realized a starting point.

A: mm

V: That I didn't want to go in—I could have went to any school, like even from here I might go to Pierce. You know what I mean? Just to get some business knowledge, you know what I mean, but it's it gave me a starting point that I could know I could work with.

A: mm-hmm

V: Where before—and with the guidance, so that's basically what my, my thought process was in coming, rather than do something bigger than I wanted to--s-smaller steps

A: mm-hmm

V: To get a bigger picture, you know what I mean, so

A: Okay

V: That was my—of why I chose to start doing this.

A: So you did--you started with a computer search--a basic computer search

V: Yes

A: Of programs

V: Yeah

A: Looking specifically for [medical billing and coding]

V: [medical billing and coding], you know, and a trade—not necessarily going to do a fo—a college-and don't, can't finish it without uhm being able to do something. Like, that you need to reserve time for, so I-I based it on that I want to find something to work at.
A: mm-hmm

V: And then build on, so that's basically, but something that I could sustain a-okay lifestyle.

(Vivian, Interview 1, Lines 35-63, 4-18-14)

This excerpt illuminates the purpose and potential Vivian saw in enrolling at Pyramid as part of a much larger plan she had for life. She later goes on to say that she intended to run a medical billing and coding business from home, which would provide her income to pursue her true desire of running a non-profit company dedicated to improving the lives of women who had experienced loss or trauma.

The steppingstone theme revealed itself in Gervais’s case, too, in that he similarly had entrepreneurial aspirations of opening his own massage therapy business to provide relief to cancer patients as an alternative therapy. Don was also tossing around ideas of becoming a registered nurse. Most unexpected was Heaven’s emerging thoughts about furthering her education once she found a job. This spoke volumes to how Pyramid helped her to feel good about her potential as a learner. In fact, following the closing of Pyramid, Heaven enrolled in program to complete her certification in MBC, and simultaneously, an associate’s degree program. Whilomena discussed enrolling in more classes to improve her computer skills, which she thought would improve her employability as a MBC professional.

**Mindset and the Leveraging of Life Experience to Inform Career Direction**

The notion of choice really did represent students doing education on their terms. They followed their minds, hearts, or gut feelings in making a decision about entering school. There were people who particularly did not like school (i.e., Mack, Heaven,
Gervais). Doc, Tamara, Whilomena and Vivian were more open to formal schooling, although each felt challenged by the demands of being an adult student and entered school with trepidation that did not necessarily subside while in school. Also, my initial assumptions about participants pushing back on the college-for-all movement were largely unfounded (Gervais is the exception). Most valued the notion of a four-year college education; however, for many such a goal just did not fit with their individual circumstances. In fact, although Mack, Heaven, Whilomena, and Vivian did not see themselves necessarily pursuing this option, they enthusiastically encouraged their children to pursue a college education.

Also notable was that participants typically approached returning to school with the mindset of either wanting to fulfill a long awaited career aspiration or to do something they felt they would really enjoy. Hence, they were leveraging their various life experiences in the world in choosing their next steps. For example, in response to my question about her program search process, Tamara described her outlook this way:

Excerpt 3:

A: Anything else about the experience of investigating this amongst some of your other choices?

T: Well I didn't have a whole lot of choices that I had in mind actually. My concern was I do something that I like, something that I am interested in because the job I had before for almost 30 years, I didn't like it. I didn't like it for the whole 30 years I was down there. Yeah and that’s, I didn't want to be in that position again because that's a long time to do something you really don't like and I had moved from position to position, and I hate to say it but I stayed there because of the salary.

(Tamara, Interview 2, Lines 388-398, 5-5-14)

Similarly, for Vivian, experiencing this economic crisis in her life brought an opportunity for reflection as to where she has been and where she hopes to go.
Fundamentally, this period of being unemployed served as a watershed moment and point of personal renewal on several fronts. As the mother of five grown children, she recalled a life of working hard and non-stop—as she puts it, “always working in survival mode” (April 18, 2014). Below, I share a brief excerpt from the ending of that conversation, which is part of a much longer discussion of her narrative of awakening.

*Excerpt 4: It's not all going to be based on what it used to be based on.*

V: Yep! Mm-hmm, but if you come to me and say, "Oh Mom, this is what." I'm-I'm there to listen, but when all that other stuff is (inaudible), I can't take that baggage, I got my own (laughing). You know what I mean? And, I do that with everything, and like you said, not really knowing what it is, but I really started evaluating all of that. You know, and=

A: =When did that start to happen?

V: Really in this process of not having. Like you said, that ah-ha moment, it really did start like, what am I gonna do with my life. Okay? It's like, you know, and as a teenager or going into adulthood, I never really functioned on that. So now it's like a different way of thinkin'. It was like, I need a job, I need--it wasn't what—no::, really thought like.

A: It was really chasing a [ dollar than something bigger. ]

V: [Yep, yep, yep! Somethin’ bigger], yeah--knowing what? It's just, I got (.) Nothing. And you see where that leads you. You know, where it leads most people, you know what mean? Nowhere.

(Vivian, Interview 2, 4-18-14)

After thinking about the sum of her life after working so hard and feeling that she had little to show for her efforts, Vivian committed herself to living a whole new way. Just to be clear, Vivian’s commentary was in reference to never thinking about a career, per se. She literally functioned in survival mode doing whatever she needed to do in the moment to earn money. With five children, and really not much family support (she was a foster child), Vivian did not have time to dream and prepare for a specific career. She
became a certified nursing assistant (CNA) by default when she departed college after year one due to pregnancy. She needed a job and the convalescent home offered her one, which eclipsed any real assessment of her interests and talents toward choosing a career intentionally.

**Knowledge of selves as learners and past experiences with school.**

*Academic self-concept and prior experiences with education.* Participants often assessed themselves as being rusty—particularly those over the age of 40. They needed assurance that they could do it, or at least that there would be support for them if they ran into trouble. Most participants expressed anxiety about becoming a student again as they did not see themselves as academically inclined (i.e., Heaven, Mack, Vivian, Whilomena, Don), or they had not been in a formal learning context in a long time (i.e., Tamara, Vivian), or they hated school generally (i.e., Gervais, Heaven, Mack). This aspect not only informed choice, but it affected their search for schools, too, as participants tended to align themselves with school types based on their earlier relationships with education/learning. This was quite prominent in the case studies of Don, Heaven, and Gervais. It was also consistent in the early life experiences of Whilomena, Vivian, and Mack. The influence of organizational habitus (McDonough, 1997) on students’ postsecondary aspirations also emerged in several participants’ stories, wherein they described how they were positioned as learners in their K-12 education as “academic” or not.

Although Tamara described herself as a lifelong learner, she feared being old and rusty amongst potentially much younger students. Therefore, she considered online
programs first. A priority, however, was that she would have access to a live person to help her if she ran into technical difficulty in an online environment. Surprisingly, many of the online options she considered could not guarantee her technical support. Therefore, she opted to enroll at Pyramid. Going forward, she stated that she would have no reservations about studying online as her fears were completely unfounded. Gervais also spoke about an online route, but later ruled it out due to the impracticality of having to relocate for several weeks to do the practicum part of the training.

**Prior experience with postsecondary education.** All participants had prior experience with postsecondary education. This was Vivian’s fourth try, and she was victorious in finally finishing a program of study. Prior to attending Pyramid, she had enrolled in a four-year college, a community college and a culinary school—none of which she was able to complete either because of academic difficulties, inadequate advising and guidance, or difficulties with managing school on top of parenting and work responsibilities. Don had completed security training at another for-profit school in the 1980s. Mack had completed a diploma program at the community college to become an emergency medical technician (EMT), a job he held for almost 30 years. Gervais reluctantly did two years at community college and another year at a four-year state school. He stated that he never wanted to attend college immediately following high school, but felt pressured to do so by his mother and school personnel. Tamara had an associate’s degree and a bachelor’s degree, which she earned as a commuter student while working. Whilomena completed a variety of training programs (e.g., cosmetology, Certified Nursing Assistant at a for-profit in the 1980s, commercial driver’s licensing).
and subsequently held a number of jobs over her lifetime. Heaven completed a computer technology program at a for-profit institution years earlier. She also attended community college for one week.

Although participants largely felt that they knew little in-depth knowledge about postsecondary education, their prior experiences with postsecondary education were used in thinking about their current options. As illustrated in Gervais’s case, his prior experience with community college and a four-year university made it clear to him what he was not interested in. He knew that he did not like traditional seat-learning settings; thus, he was adamant about seeking something that was “hands-on” and engaging. Heaven’s prior brief experience with the community college informed her that such an environment was too big and impersonal to adequately support her as a learner who was not strong academically.

Don, Whilomena, Mack, and Heaven all had prior experience with occupational training programs, and thus had an understanding of what they could expect in such programs. First and foremost, they appreciated that the focus was toward training for a specific job rather than merely taking courses for the sake of being more “educated.” Mack had actually attended a community college program when he completed training for EMT because he was directed to go there by a paramedic at his local firehouse during an impromptu information interview. Mack, however, did not see himself as the academic type. Hence career/trade schools, which he understood as places for job preparation were solely of interest to him.
Adults’ Experiences Overlap with Research on Traditional Age Students

One of the immediate observations that I made in this research is that many of the same factors that have been found to impact the college choice experience of traditional-age students remained salient for the adults in this research study (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Freeman, 1997; Rose, 2005, 2012). Previously documented research about the influence of family, socio-economic status, academic achievement and preparation, students’ relationships with formal schooling (i.e., positive or negative), organizational habitus, lack of information about postsecondary education, etc., were all just as relevant in shaping these adults experiences as described in the profile chapters I constructed around Don, Heaven, and Gervais. This is not very surprising as most participants remained relatively stable in their social class standing since childhood. However, this is not at all suggestive that encounters with peers, church members, employers, and a host of interested others did not impact learners’ trajectories.

The impact of social class. All participants emanated from poor or working-class families where usually neither their parents or siblings had completed postsecondary education. An exception to this was Gervais, whose mother was a college graduate as well as his sister, with whom he was very close in age. Further, Gervais’s grandfather spent his career in the military, which permitted his mother to live internationally for part of her early life. Despite his family’s experience with postsecondary education, he still would classify as coming from a working-class background.
Tamara was the first person in her family to earn a college degree of any kind. She remarked how this was a rather serendipitous accomplishment as she did not have any role models or push at home to finish high school much less pursue higher education. In retrospect, she cited a handful of caring teachers who planted the seed that she could and should attend college, as she was identified early on as academically inclined. Her experience is consistent with status attainment models which underscores that individuals with greater academic promise get the greatest amount of support to pursue college (Perna, 2006). As a result of working in corporate America for almost 30 years, Tamara had indeed crossed over into the upper middle class. Nonetheless, she still felt that the world of postsecondary education was still something of a maze to figure out. Although Tamara managed to find her way through it as an undergraduate student, she, in no way, perceived herself to be an expert in this area. She simply got lucky. In Tamara’s response to my Qualtric survey, she thanked me for inviting her to be a participant of this study as she felt she had learned a lot in the process. Tamara was educated in Delaware County, PA, public schools.

Vivian described being raised in a crippling foster care situation that she still finds herself emerging from. Her earlier failed attempts at completing college were very related to the poor nurturing she received in a home that she described as having the resources to better guide her trajectory. Given what she described, I wholeheartedly agreed with her analysis. Vivian attended and graduated from the Philadelphia public school system.

As described in Don’s case, he too received little guidance from family or school regarding college and careers. While he has always found a way to make a living—often
with more than one job—he was very cognizant of the mentoring he missed out on as a child growing up. Don attended and graduated from the Philadelphia Public School District.

Mack was raised by his father and eventually a step-mother following the death of his mother when he was a young child. He described his father working a variety of blue-collar jobs (e.g., truck driver, mechanic), to which he spoke of admirably for he looked up to his father for his many talents. From Mack’s estimation, his father could do anything. After a brief stint in Catholic school, he attended public school. He described himself as never being interested in school. Ironically, he dreamed of being a medical doctor, but shared that he just did not have the patience or fortitude to attend school for so long. Mack married and worked at a department store for a several years following high school graduation. Amid starting a family, he began to think seriously about a finding a career. He remained interested in the medical field, and sought shorter training routes to work in medicine. After an impromptu conversation with his local fire house, he pursued training to become an emergency medical technician.

Whilomena’s parents both worked in Philadelphia’s booming factor industry that once existed. Her mother worked in a factory as a seamstress and her father worked in a factory that made holiday decorations. Amongst her siblings, she has a brother that became a barber, a sister who had a job working for a factory, and another brother who was an auto mechanic that also taught this trade in a vocational education high school. Whilomena attended and graduated from the Philadelphia School District.
As described in her chapter, Heaven’s family members all had blue-collar jobs, which for a time paid well until industry dried up. Although no one in her family was college educated, she recalls her father and grandmother having high hopes for her to become either an attorney or a teacher. Heaven was educated in a public school district of Delaware County, PA.

**Mentoring.** Despite not having family role models in regard to postsecondary education, participants spoke of mentors and others in their social or work context (e.g., Vivian and Don) that inspired them in adulthood to consider postsecondary education. In Don’s chapter, I highlighted the way in which he observed the world around him in charting a new course for his life. Vivian spoke in retrospect about several people she encountered in her adult life who encouraged her to aspire to complete various postsecondary education programs.

Although Tamara gives credit to her teachers in high school for opening the door to college for her, she asserts that it was her mother’s heroic act of completing her GED in adulthood and subsequently enrolling in college to become an licensed practical nurse (LPN) in her early 50s that gave Tamara the courage to return to school in her 50s. In the 1990s, Art Levine and Jana Niddifer (1996) wrote a book titled, *How the Poor Get to College*, which focused on the experiences of adults that attended community college. Through their qualitative study, they highlighted how mentors—who students often merely had short-term relationships with—made the critical difference in those adults choosing to matriculate in school. These participants’ cases featured a similar theme with regard to their engagements with postsecondary education.
Cost of Attendance

Participants did not express any real concern about price. I typically had to initiate the discussion about this factor. Notably, five of the seven participants (e.g., Gervais, Tamara, Vivian, Mack, and Heaven) had prior experience with community college, so it was somewhat surprising to me that the cost difference was not a larger factor in their decision-making. Yet, it speaks to the ever-growing boutique nature of postsecondary education. Scholars and policy makers frequently highlight the higher cost of for-profit education as a negative (Kinser, 2006b; Revelle, 1997; Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Tierney, 2013; Zamani-Gallaher, 2004). Although it is also noted that determining true cost comparisons with public, non-profit institutions is not so straightforward due to government support, etc. in the non-profit world (Bailey et al., 2001; Cellini, 2012; Shinoda, 2013).

Participants, for the most part, knew that they could do similar programs at the community college, but opted not to because a) Pyramid fit their schedule, b) it offered practical hands-on training in a short-term format without too many “extra” courses, c) it was convenient to get to, d) they got accepted, and/or e) they felt good about what they saw when they explored the school in person.

It appears that students paid on average $16,000 for their programs of study, which ran for approximately nine months—an average of $1,777/month. Pyramid really succeeded in packaging these programs in a way that was very palatable to students. Repeatedly, participants talked about only having to pay $80/month, which I later learned through examining Heaven’s financial aid paperwork only pertained to a small private
loan in addition to federally-backed student loans. In fact, her aid package consisted of approximately 60% loans. As described in Heaven’s chapter, she expressed zero concern about the Pyramid program costing more than the community college’s medical billing and coding program. As far as she was concerned, it was most important to go where she felt comfortable—returning to her theme of things needing to feel right in her gut. Although she does not articulate it as such, I assessed that she perceived the cost to be greater if she was unable to complete the community college’s perceptibly more academic program.

Gervais and Don were also okay with paying for the experience that they felt suited their needs and preferences. Tamara shared that she actually paid $6,500 cash towards her bill. In essence, participants of this study were willing to pay for the experience that they really wanted educationally, if they could find a way to afford it. The availability of financial aid clearly enabled them to select their educational experience agentically. As participants talked about searching for schools, education began to sound like any other commodity of interest (e.g., a car, cell phone, television). It remains to be seen if their perspectives shift in retrospect about the cost of these programs. Marecki’s (1985) dissertation research reported a similar finding in that students did not express concern in paying a higher cost for their program. His speculation was that deferred loans made it difficult for participants to appreciate the true cost of their education. Participants’ stories in my research suggested that they were adamant about the type of educational experience they wanted, and they were willing to pay more for the experience that they perceived best suited their needs and preferences.
Location

Travel distance was also a repeated theme, which often emerged on its own in how participants described their choice process. Most participants prioritized their choices to the schools that were most convenient to get to. However, an exception to this was Don, Vivian, and Whilomena, who all commuted from Philadelphia. Don and Whilomena’s stories of searching for schools highlighted various barriers that indicated that they somewhat went with what was available to them. Therefore, they made rather long commutes via public transportation to complete their programs. Vivian stated that she felt good about what Pyramid said that they could provide her. After experiencing several unsuccessful attempts at higher education already, Vivian elected the “trade school” option because she felt it accommodated her academic level. In essence, Pyramid was considered a baby step in getting started again. Gervais, Tamara, Heaven, and Mack articulated that travel distance was a very high priority, and carefully made their decisions with this in mind. Ironically, they were also the ones who drove to school.

Decision-Making in Isolation

Private vs. public process. Participants of this study spoke of being hesitant to share their plans for attending school with others. Hence the college choice experience was a very private one unlike the public nature often characteristic of traditional-age students. This was an interesting finding but one that I had heard before anecdotally. Participants of this study did not want to hear naysayers, so they kept their plans secret until they got where they needed to be. Whilomena, Don, Gervais, and Vivian specifically spoke to this issue. Heaven had to report to her in-laws about her progress as
they were trying to assist her with becoming financially independent. There was tension around her waiting so late in life to start a career, as highlighted in her chapter. Mack did not mention talking to others about his plans for school. At the time of our meeting, he was divorced and alienated from his grown children. Tamara states that she only confided in a long-time friend that she grew up with about her plans. Gervais shared his educational interests with family and was ridiculed much like some others had feared. He consequently dropped his plans after his first negative encounter with family, but much later secretly pursued training to become a massage therapist.

It is unfortunate that people felt the need to keep their plans secret because talking to others could have been helpful in thoroughly investigating their options. This speaks to the need of unbiased coaching for adults about postsecondary education in the city and surrounding region. As of now, there are few places adults can turn to for assistance with postsecondary education decision making in the Philadelphia region. Some outlets that do exist (e.g., Graduate! Philadelphia, Phillygoes2college, Veterans Upward Bound, EOP, CareerLink) have limitations in assisting adults. For instance, Graduate! Philadelphia is dedicated to supporting adults who are interested in completing an unfinished bachelor’s degree. They also have a financial relationship with the institutions with whom they are partners, meaning that students would need to work with an established choice set of institutions. Thus, none of the individuals in my research would have found Graduate! Philadelphia to be an option, for they were not interested in earning a 4-year degree.

As for Veterans Upward Bound (housed at the University of Pennsylvania), one must actually be a veteran of the U.S. armed services in order to utilize the
comprehensive supports offered. None of the participants of this study were veterans. The Pennsylvania CareerLink offices have limited resources available in helping people to retrain for other jobs, some of which include the Trade Adjustment Assistance Program (TAA), which provides federally-paid educational opportunities for those who have lost their jobs as a result of foreign trade, which affected none of my study participants. Generally, CareerLink only offers a list of educational providers to which they recommend people for short-term training (e.g., All State Career, a for-profit which provides truck driving training among other short-term programs). Outside of this, they do not provide extensive assistance with postsecondary education guidance. Kate Hyzer, director of the Delaware County Literacy Council, shared that there is a growing movement within adult literacy councils to assist clients with moving into postsecondary education (personal communication, April 25, 2014)\textsuperscript{11}. In fact, her office was hiring personnel specifically to help GED completers with career and postsecondary advising. Nonetheless, participants of this study would not have been in the position to utilize this service.

PhillyGoes2College, located at City Hall inside the Mayor’s Office of Education, is primarily geared towards traditional-age audiences (e.g., SAT/ACT workshops, college essay writing). The College Access Center of Delaware County also reported serving middle school and high school students primarily (personal communication J. Ghana, 3/11/2014). In my interview with Terri White, Higher Education Advisor for the Mayor’s

\textsuperscript{11} This is in connection to the Workforce Investment Act funding that the literacy councils received through the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. WIA is one of three funding sources to Adult Basic Education in the state. WIA stipulates goals of literacy develop to support people in becoming work ready.
Office of Education, she confirmed my reading that most of the supports for postsecondary attendance were in fact geared for youth, not adults (personal communication, 3-23-15). She also clarified that approximately 90% of their efforts in the Mayor’s Office of Education went toward K-12 matters. The two most prominent efforts in raising the educational attainment levels of adults in Philadelphia pertained to tuition assistance of city employees and Graduate! Philadelphia. She highlighted as a good resource for adults programs such as Penn State’s Educational Opportunity Center in Philadelphia, a federal TRIO program, which serves adults who are age 19 and over, low income and/or from families where neither parent has acquired a bachelor’s degree. The University of Pennsylvania houses the same program for residents residing in certain parts of the city. Navigating oneself to these opportunities is challenging, however, for they do not appear well publicized.

I asked participants if they accessed any of these resources in the Qualtrics survey I e-mailed them. Out of the five participants that responded, only one person stated that he sought assistance from CareerLink. And only one person sought assistance through his church. As for other resources they accessed, two of the five respondents said they read the gainful employment/program disclosure statements for Pyramid, and two out of five participants said that they talked to current students about their experiences with Pyramid prior to enrolling. In large part, however, participants made their decisions independently, and with support from admissions representatives.

One final note is that although Don was the only one who spoke about his church as being a source of information, Vivian, Whilomena, Tamara, and Mack all had a
connection to a church, too. I came to realize that the church could serve as an important
vehicle in transferring knowledge about postsecondary education opportunities and
careers. In essence, the incorporation of an educational ministry could be a great resource
to members across all generations.

The Internet.

Uhmm. The reason why I chose Google, I used Google because I didn't know what else
to pick. You know. (Gervais, 6/23/14)

Overall, students expressed that they accessed really just a few resources as many
felt that they did not know where else to get information. The most widely used resource
was the Internet. With the exception of Mack, participants typically relied on the Internet
when searching for career information, a school, or a program of study. Often times,
participants (i.e., Heaven, Gervais, Don, Vivian, Whilomena, Tamara) described their
search process as looking for a particular training, which would lead them to institutions
offering such training (Heaven’s case study is a good example of this). As described in
Don’s chapter, searching on the Internet could be somewhat of a precarious adventure.
Whilomena discussed putting her name in an online form from which various schools
continued to call her. If participants saw something of interest, they typically contacted
the school to investigate it further.

Generally, participants reported disliking that they had to provide their contact
information through the computer to get info about programs because the callbacks never
ended. After a while, some avoided that altogether and just came on site to speak to
someone in person about what they read on Internet, or they discussed their interest via
phone. Mack, however, reported that he merely came off the street as he was driving
through the area to explore Pyramid Career School. He stated that he saw the sign and figured he would see what the school might have to offer him. Mack had become restless with an unfruitful attempt to find employment and believed that school might give him access to employers through the externship experience. He reportedly did not investigate any other schools.

**Admissions Representatives**

One of the prominent parts of participants’ decision making was the encounter they had with admissions representatives. Every participant had his or her own story about the positive interaction they experienced that solidified their initial interest in enrolling at Pyramid Career School. Participants asserted that these encounters were actually quite crucial in their decision making. They evaluated what they both heard from the admissions representatives and observed as they toured the facility. Vivian’s account, featured below, was particularly powerful in how she describes feeling accepted by the school personnel as she was, and that they were willing to support her step-by-step in completing the MBC program—support that she did not perceive having in her other attempts at postsecondary education.

*Excerpt 5: I needed somebody that could see me for me…*

V: Like a lot of schools, like they have leave your e-mail—they try to get you through the computer.

A: Mm-hmm

V: And all of that. You know what I mean? But, when I called they answered. Okay, that was one thing

A: Oh really?!
V: And I--that was one thing, and I didn't want to go through, you know, so when they answered, I asked a question, they answered it, you know what I mean? And, and, I-I-I, that to me (0.4) was uhm somethin’ important. You know what I mean. It wasn't like you-you know going through so then when I came, the way they set up, I don't, where they introduce you to everybody

A: mm-hmm

V: okay. And they talk to you--even the uhm, uhm, Mr. uhm [campus director], who's in charge=

A: okay

V: =of the program--of the, you know--he sat down and talked to me, you know what I mean? And I thought that was good. He asked, "Why are you here?" And it just clicked (illegible).

A: mm-[hmm ]

V: [you know what I mean?] Where it's like that's what I'm saying to myself. I need to know why I'm here. You know what I mean.

A: Wow!

V: And those kind of things—like I came with another person, and he's kind of was like an intellect, so he: uhm wanted more, you know, but for me that wasn't what I need. I needed somebody that could see me for me and help me go through the motions, you know what I mean? Sometimes, you need somebody to guide you through the steps. And it was a process that guided me through the steps more so than ME trying to guide myself through the steps. Where, I'm--like you said-- didn't meet the advisor that I should've met that a lot of things were not there, so a lot of it was the perception that I got over the phone too. And I think for even, Eva (her friend, who also eventually enrolled), you know, how they addressed a person. They said they saw you--even if it was what they were trained to do, it was enough to get me to say— you know what I mean?

(Vivian, Interview 1, Lines 2-30, 4-18-14)

As articulated in Vivian’s interview, participants valued the friendliness and timely response of staff to their questions and concerns. Gervais similarly compared
Pyramid’s positive response to his encounters with other schools that did not bother to return his calls when he inquired about their programs. And beyond just being courteous, participants prioritized the quality and content of the information they received from the admissions reps. They appeared to really read value in the way that Pyramid employees responded to their inquiries with confidence and straightforward answers. Participants’ descriptions of their visits to campus suggested that they were indeed critically listening to and observing what admissions staff said and did during their visit. Notable is Vivian’s metacommentary above about how the admissions staff was probably trained to respond to her in the way that they did. Nonetheless, she appreciated that they knew better to respond this manner. Tamara and Gervais used information that they found online to fact check or compare program requirements with what they heard from admissions representatives. Drawing off of his EMT training, Mack similarly observed the facility to see that it was equipped to train him for a career in medical assisting.

Tamara provided a slight critique of Pyramid representatives as a little-over-the-top—i.e., eager and somewhat overselling in their approach, but not to the point of being turned off by this. Vivian’s companion, who accompanied her to visit Pyramid did not like the school because he perceived the staff as being too friendly and trying too hard to sell their programs. Vivian reported that her friend later remarked how much of a difference the program made in changing her outlook on life—conceding that it was a good decision for her to attend in the end.

Aside from the professional and courteous treatment participants received at their campus visit, it was clear that most participants relied on their interaction with
admissions representatives in sorting out or confirming their options. Each person engaged thoughtfully about a potential career direction to pursue, often without a lot of support and guidance. Therefore, even if they arrived at the school with a career track in mind, some participants left themselves open to hearing other options. Those who were a bit more definitive about their career desires (e.g., Tamara and Gervais) often compared what they heard from admissions personnel to their own research, which was largely based on Internet findings (e.g., Occupational Handbook Guide other school websites) or information they got from some other source (e.g., personal acquaintances, church, professional trade organizations).

Age as a Mediating Factor

I honestly did not anticipate interviewing 50 and 60-year old students as part of this research. My imagined audience was really between ages 25-35. Yet, I was pleasantly surprised to encounter the older students, who I feel, made my investigation of this topic even more rich and relevant to the trends occurring in the economy and the postsecondary community. It brought to my attention the concerns and potential constraints of those who are older (i.e., 50s and 60s) and in need of retraining to survive. As Tamara exclaimed, “I don’t really believe in the consensus that 50 is the new 40. I believe 50 is 50!”—highlighting the importance of time as a choice factor.

There is no argument that education is a costly investment both moneywise and timewise, which is the foundation of econometric models of college choice (Perna, 2006). Hence for a more mature adult, different types of questions about making such an investment emerges. Will an individual be hired for the career he or she studies for in a
world where age discrimination is a real issue—potentially rending an investment in training and educational useless? What does the return on investment look like for adults in their 40s, 50s, and 60s who pursue postsecondary education with a predictably shorter time remaining in the workforce? Given the seemingly overnight changes that are occurring in the world of work, will the careers/programs individuals pursue even be relevant by the time they complete training (Selingo, 2013)? Although not all participants explicitly asserted these concerns, my research raised these types of questions in reflecting upon their decision-making process to attend Pyramid Career School. And because age, in some way or another, was a common topic amongst participants, I assessed that this factor, in addition to their economic conditions, contributed to participants’ gravitation toward short-term certificate programs.

**A Proposed Model of Participants’ Choice Process**

As I thought about the interworking of the variables I found in participants’ stories about navigating their way to postsecondary education, and Pyramid, in particular, a process appears to take shape. The most prominent theme of these students’ experiences with postsecondary choice centered on a critical incident making school a seemingly necessary next step, which I frame as *Phase 1* of their process. In essence, the heart of participants’ intentions for enrolling in school was to establish economic security in the aftermath of a critical incident in their lives. What cannot be overlooked is the context of participants’ decision making. Looming in the background of their choice experience was a poor economy, which was characterized by a heightening of qualifications for even the most entry level of jobs, and simply fewer non-skilled positions. After a period of trying
alternatives to returning to school, participants eventually realized that they had to get training and education in order to have any chance of participating in the workforce again. I refer to this as the second phase of participants’ choice process. As Van Horn (2013) found in his research, many adults displaced during the Great Recession actually had a difficult time getting to this point, which made these participants somewhat extraordinary.

As described earlier, the fourth layer of Perna’s (2006) model highlights the “social, economic, and policy context” as an important factor to students’ decision making. My research showcases a specific account of how this layer initiates students’ decision-making process. These variables include the Great Recession of 2007, ageism, a globalized economy that values knowledge and specialized skills, and the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. A more critical framing of this context, however, is what scholars refer to as social precarity (Jorgensen, 2015; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008).

Jorgensen defines precarity as:

an ever-growing number of people across the world, living and working precariously, usually in a series of short-term jobs, without recourse to stable occupational identities or careers, stable social protection or relevant protective regulations...Retrenchment of securities (related to labour market, employment, job, work, skill production, income and representation) is a main dynamic of precaritization. (Jorgensen, 2015, p. 4)

In essence, the world that many of these participants came to know no longer existed, and they struggled to reposition their footing amid a rapidly changing economy in which employee rights and privileges are now marginalized in the pursuit of corporate profit margins.
After a sometimes lengthy period of trying alternatives to enrolling in school, the third phase of participants’ decision-making process was to enter a zone in which they worked through several elements of decision making: a) figuring out what type of job or career they could move into that would also be enjoyable and offer some personal fulfillment; b) the evaluation of job prospects for a particular career/occupational area; c) evaluating academic self-concept and their former relationships with school; and d) assessing the time it would take to complete training and education in order to access the new job of interest. Entering this phase is not something to underestimate as many other adults do not make this step despite their circumstances. Although I know this anecdotally, Van Holt’s (2013) research documents it. The element in which students explore their interests is notably underdiscussed in college choice scholar for traditional-age students, as Selingo’s (2015) book suggests.

In phase four, participants next sought institutions and programs with which they had a comfort level. Notably, there is some overlap with their decision making about a career track and programs of study, as Heaven’s scenario demonstrates. Whilomena, Mack, and Don similarly mentioned that they remained open to what schools had to offer, as they tried to settle on a course of direction. Hence, they were not necessarily firm in their career plans. At this stage, if participants found a program they liked, they proceeded with the application. If there was something they found unappealing about the institution, they kept looking. Unlike many youths, the adults in this research tended to investigate one school at a time rather than many options at once. Aside from Tamara’s deliberations for online support, there were no tales of struggling to whittle down their
options. If an institution was not a fit, participants quickly moved on to evaluate the next option. Characteristically, participants evaluated institutions according to program offering (inclusive of length of program), location, the interaction participants had with admissions staff and their impressions of the setting. The fifth phase of their process was to evaluate cost and their ability to pay. If their information gathering went smoothly and no better opportunities (i.e., a job) emerged before registering for a program, then participants enrolled at Pyramid, which constitutes the sixth and final phase.

**Figure 1. A Model of Participants’ Postsecondary Choice Process in Coming to Pyramid Career School**

**Legend for Phase 3:**

A: Figuring out Career Direction that Brings Joy and Personal Fulfillment  
B: Evaluation of Job Prospects  
C: Reflect on Academic Self-Concept/Former Relationship with School  
D: Evaluation of Program Length while Exploring Schools
It is difficult to say with certainty which of the elements in Phase 3 precede the others, so readers should not interpret the elements labeled “A-B-C-D” as having any ordered meaning. Participants’ stories suggested that evaluation of program length took precedence in their decision making due to their economic circumstances; however, I did not ask participants to rate the order of these elements labeled A, B, C, and D. I assume that these elements of their process are prioritized according to the individual. Tamara, for instance, although concerned with being a little rusty as a student, was not as concerned as Heaven about her academic ability. Program length actually seemed to drive Tamara’s decision making given her discussion of age, her anticipated retirement, and where she was in terms of financial resources. Therefore, element D, likely took priority in her decision making. Heaven’s academic self-concept and former relationship with school was very prominent in her discussions with me about her choice; therefore, element C, appeared to be driving her decision-making process in this phase.

Although the model appears linear, students’ experiences may not be this neatly ordered and fixed. There are stops and starts along their journey, as well as instances of looping around these phases. In some instances individuals aborted the process and began again at that same spot or elsewhere in the model. For instance, both Mack and Gervais reported returning to Pyramid after initially backing out the first time they explored going to school. In each of their cases, they tried to make a go of things through a route other than attending school. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, school was perceived as a last-ditch effort to becoming employed. In Mack’s case, he left the state to help a family member in poor health and thought the relocation might yield him a job opportunity.
This, however, did not happen. Gervais felt dissuaded by his family to pursue a career in massage therapy, and subsequently tried to enter the military instead. When entrance into the military did not work out, he resumed his plans to attend school. Both Mack and Gervais were far into the decision-making process when they decided another course of action. Nonetheless, this tentative model is representative of the main components of participants’ decision making as described to me.

Chapter Summary

The impetus of participants’ decisions to pursue a program at Pyramid Career School was largely a result of the economy, and the need to re-establish themselves quickly. Therefore, the short-term nature of Pyramid’s programs was especially attractive. Students were not interested in degree programs. After experiencing what I refer to as a critical incident in their lives that emanated from poor health, loss of a job, or a combination of these issues, participants came to the conclusion that they must get trained or be retrained for a different kind of work. Situated in the environmental context of what scholars such as Neilson and Rossiter (2008) frame as precarity, enrolling in school at this time in their lives was as Gervais put it, “a necessary evil.” For some, however, it represented an opportunity to discover their potential or to resituate themselves in more enjoyable work—a change they would not have made if their lives had not been interrupted.

In the current economic context of precarity, postsecondary education has become a requirement for individuals to complete for even the most entry level of jobs. Further the onus on acquiring education and training is now shifted onto individuals rather than
companies who once provided training and funding opportunities for education, as Vivian’s case highlights and Van Horn’s (2013; 2015) research underscores. The condition of precarity also inspired individuals to give up the idea of working for someone else and consider ways of becoming entrepreneurs as some participants highlight as their reason for returning to school.

Perna (2006) highlights that the search phase of college choice is one of the least explored areas of this process (p. 102). Through this research, I learned a number of interesting things about the resources and processes adults used to vet institutions, in what Hossler and Gallagher (1987) frame as the search phase of their model. First and foremost, the search process often appeared as a two-layered approach. Students were not only shopping for a school/program, but they were also investigating career options. This aspect of postsecondary choice is not discussed in existing college choice literature; nonetheless, it was a notable element of my participants’ stories. In recent literature about the value of education credentials, the type of scrutiny many of these participants engaged in is being advised, as the return on investment in education varies with field of study (Carnevale, 2013; Ewert & Kominski, 2014; Van Horn, 2015).

Related to this finding is the role of admissions staff, who were a very important part of the equation in helping students decide to attend Pyramid. Students typically reported not having a lot of knowledge about postsecondary decision making (Qualtrics survey and interviews), nor did they many feel comfortable with telling others about their plans. Thus, the support that the admissions representatives provided was often well received, even though students sometimes recognized that they were being courted to
enroll (e.g., Mack, Vivian, Whilomena, Tamara, Gervais). This, of course, highlights the potential for students to be taken advantage of by unethical schools (Campbell & Deil-Amen, 2012).

Aside from relying on admissions representative for information, most students began their exploration for careers and educational training online, accessing resources such as the Department of Labor’s *Occupational Handbook Guide*. Participants often stated that they really did not know where else to go for information. Fearful of receiving a negative response to their plans, participants declined to talk openly about their plans amongst others. At the same time, participants discussed the ways in which they were mentored, so to speak, in considering possible job and training opportunities. Tamara drew from her mother’s journey back to school in late age. Vivian felt encouraged by a number of role models and mentors to further her education throughout her adult life. Don notably read the experiences of others around him in charting a new direction for himself.

The issue of cost was not a big concern for participants, for they received financial aid to support their enrollment. Pyramid’s financial aid packaging made their training appear affordable in that they typically just paid $80/month on a private loan while in school, with the remainder of their school loans (if any received) were deferred until after graduation. People seemingly took the stance that they had to do what they needed to do and that they would worry about paying for school on the backend. In the moment, they felt that the investment was necessary to make if they wanted to ever work
again. Relatedly, selecting a school which offered quick training and a supportive learning environment was perceived essential to achieving their economic goals.

An aside to that, none of my participants expressed complete confidence in obtaining employment after finishing their programs, although they were immensely hopeful. Some participants (e.g., Tamara, Don, Whilomena, and Vivian) voiced an interest in potentially furthering their education beyond earning their occupational certificates/certifications, but this was on the condition that it made sense to do so. Nonetheless, most participants framed their attendance at Pyramid as the first step toward a new beginning—a measure that would allow them to get established financially, as described Don, Heaven, and Gervais’s chapters.

In conducting this study, one issue that became apparent for me was that “adulthood” was a broad spectrum and that where one fell on the age spectrum might potentially limit an individual’s decision making around their postsecondary options. The topic of age discrimination was a looming concern amongst some of my participants—who also sought my opinion on the matter. My study was not designed to thoroughly investigate this issue; however, I hope that it ignites further research in this area as the immediate future appears to demand continuous training over the course of one’s lifetime, as Van Horn (2013; 2015) and other scholars assert.
CHAPTER EIGHT

WHAT’S IN A NAME? EXAMINING THE LANGUAGING OF FOR-PROFIT EDUCATION

What something means to individuals is dependent on the discourses available to them.
(Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008, p. 476)

Language makes no sense outside of Discourses, and the same is true for literacy.
(Gee, 2008, p. 3)

In this chapter, I discuss my findings in reference to the second half of my research questions, which focused on the discursive framing of for-profit education in relation to participants’ decision making. As a reminder, I reiterate my second set of research questions below:

In the Philadelphia region, how do adults experience the discourse of for-profit education? Second, how do participants read their institutional type (Pyramid) among other institutional types? And thirdly, how does Pyramid Career School, one distinct example of a for-profit institution, discursively portray itself as an education provider?

The notion of discourse played a central role in this research from multiple angles. First, I framed this research in the context of the “college for all movement” that has taken shape in the United States (Boesel, & Fredland, 1999; Carr, 2013; Deil-Amen, & DeLuca, 2010; Rosenbaum, 2001), which seems now to engage people at all ages in the wake of the 2007 Great Recession. And second, I sought to understand participants’ sense making of for-profit institutions as a viable educational option for themselves despite the overwhelmingly negative discourse framing this body of education providers.
A third aspect emerged as I thought about the way in which Pyramid Career School portrayed itself as an education provider amid criticisms of for-profit institutions.

As described in Chapter 3, the framing of my findings in this section are based upon Gee’s conceptualization of Discourses. For my purposes, little “d” discourse pertains to circulating narratives, perspectives, arguments, stances, etc.12 Big “D” Discourse pertains to language’s association with other identity attributes such as beliefs, behaviors, values, ways of reading and writing, speaking, and interacting that make something or someone recognizable as a certain kind of person, institution, etc. (Gee, 2008, p. 3). In this way, Gee asserts, Discourses are “identity kits” (p. 2) that include more than language; they are “socially situated identities” (p. 3). To that end, I aimed to explore how Pyramid Career School asserted its own socially situated identity as a postsecondary education provider to which participants responded, despite the general negative reputation of for-profit schools.

Further, I make use of the building blocks that Gee (2008) uses in developing his theory of language and literacy under the construct of “Discourses.” In his discussion of meaning and ideology, Gee refers to cultural models, or “little stories,” that inform individuals’ meaning making of language. According to Gee, language meaning is not necessarily consistent between interlocutors. Hence participants in a dialogue are constantly monitoring for meaning. And rather than people adhering to dictionary

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12 Gee (1990), himself, just defines little “d” discourses as “connected stretches of language that makes sense, like conversations, stories, reports, arguments; ‘discourse’ is part of “Discourse”(p. 142).
definitions of words, Gee states that they actually rely on their own tacit theories, or cultural models, about what a word means, as well as what that meaning encompasses.

My findings in this section are based upon a variety of data that I collected while conducting this study. Although I did not frame this research as an ethnography, my study contains an ethnographic component in that I constantly observed the educational landscape broadly and locally. This means that I observed the discourse pertaining to postsecondary education—and for-profit education particularly—through multiple outlets: Internet, radio, television, periodicals, institutional advertisements, government agencies, and academic scholarship. I also engaged with a range of interested others in the region about my topic, who were invaluable in helping me frame my understanding of the way in which for-profit education is discoursed, understood, and subsequently taken up by various stakeholders. Some of these more notable individuals include, Terri White, the Higher Education Advisor for the Mayor’s Office of Education in Philadelphia, PA; Thomas Butler, head of the Philadelphia College Prep Roundtable; Kate Hyzer, director of the Delaware County Literacy Council; workers at the Pennsylvania CareerLink office in Chester, PA. Several individuals who worked at a for-profit institution as well as those who work in traditional higher education, and numerous colleagues, associates, family members, and friends also contributed their perspectives to my research topic.

I also circulated in spaces where the business of college access was actively being promoted. For instance, in the winter of 2014, I attended an adult college fair held in Chester, PA, at the invitation of Julani Ghana, director of the College Access Center of Delaware County—a non-profit consortium founded by the presidents of Cheney
University, Swarthmore College, Widener University, Delaware County Community College, Penn State Brandywine, and Neumann University—to promote college readiness to youth and adults (“CACDC website, August 12, 2015). I also attended Philadelphia College Prep Roundtable (PCPR) monthly meetings before, during, and after my official data collection began in March 2014. The PCPR is a long-standing grassroots organization dedicated to creating college access to traditional-age students primarily, yet the leadership of PCPR has been entertaining the idea of expanding their focus to other groups such as adults. According to the PCPR website, the organization is described as

[A] network of professionals from non-profit and campus-based college prep programs, university admissions and financial aid offices, and school districts in the Philadelphia region. The PCPR exists to provide professional development and support which will ultimately increase the number of students who are college-ready, matriculate and graduate from post-secondary institutions. Meeting on campuses throughout the Philadelphia region, the members of the Roundtable address common concerns such as students’ academic preparedness, college entrance/placement examinations, and parental involvement and assist in the effectiveness of college guidance process.

(PCPR website, retrieved July 31, 2015)

Participation in PCPR was important in that it offered an opportunity to get a pulse of the postsecondary education movement in the Philadelphia region (and beyond) from a variety of vantage points because of the diverse constituents attending the meetings. I often engaged others there about the topic of for-profit education, which was useful in confirming my reading of the low regard to which many college access

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13 I am a member of the Philadelphia College Prep Roundtable.
professionals held this sector of institutions and avoided encouraging students in this direction.

I also collected and analyzed data pertaining to Pyramid Career School, such as pictures of the institution, their website, brochures, the admissions and financial aid materials of one student (i.e., Heaven), and any media coverage or otherwise publicly accessible information about the school (e.g., Better Business Bureau ratings, news reports and web forums discussing student and employee experiences with the school). The purpose of which was to examine Pyramid’s internal and external constructions of identity. Last but not least, the interviews and impromptu conversations that I had with participants and a handful of staff members at Pyramid also inform the subsequent discussion presented in this chapter.

**Encounters with Naming in the Field**

From the outset of my interest in researching for-profit education as a postsecondary choice, I experienced difficulty in talking to others about this topic because many people were unsure of what the term for-profit education meant. And for those who were familiar with the term, I usually observed a negative reaction when talking about these schools. The first issue, in particular, posed a serious problem for me as I was relying on my recruitment materials to explain my study on their own when family, friends, and colleagues disseminated these materials on my behalf. I made note to say something about this issue when it came time to write my thesis, although I did not yet recognize the potential of nomenclature being as significant a finding within itself. Hence this chapter begins with me first discussing my own challenges of finding a
language to which I could discuss for-profit education as an institutional type amongst various people.

The very first place I posted a recruitment flyer was at the hair salon I have patronized in South Jersey for many years. Immediately my hairdresser asked me to explain what a for-profit institution was. As she was not the only person asking this question, I attempted to revise my recruitment materials to be more explicit about the schools from which I was interested in drawing participants. In some documents, I listed examples of these institutions in the Philadelphia area (See Appendix A – “Before” example). This, however, made me somewhat uncomfortable as I was engaging in tagging institutions in a way that might possibly offend or alienate others who either attended any of those schools or worked at one, for I knew that the term for-profit generally had a negative connotation to it.

My response was not merely something that I was imagining, but based upon several experiences along the way while preparing to conduct this research. For instance, in 2012, immediately following the defense of my dissertation proposal, I had a rather painful and disappointing encounter with the campus manager of a branch of Lincoln Technical Institute in Philadelphia, PA, about potentially recruiting students from his site for this study. After patiently listening to my spiel in an engaging manner, he politely dismissed me stating that he would never allow me to interview Lincoln students, citing that I might misrepresent the school in my research. I was politely and promptly dismissed from the premises. Needless to say, panic about continuing with this study overwhelmed me for a long time afterwards. What if nobody said yes to my request?
Almost two years later, someone eventually said yes. Nonetheless, this story underscores how languaging institutions as “for-profit” is indeed a sensitive matter to those who work in this sector as well as individuals in the general public.

Much later, I found myself talking to an admissions counselor at another nationally, well-known for-profit institution that a colleague had introduced me to. He was very receptive of my study—citing that his school’s administrative unit would be very interested in my findings. Having a flashback of my experience with Lincoln Tech, I found myself feeling intensely uncomfortable again in using the term “for-profit” in the discussion of my dissertation research, especially amidst the heightened attention in the media of the federal government’s crackdown on abusers in this market (Stevens & Kirst, 2015). Further, it was hard to ignore the fact that my research questions positioned for-profit institutions as an other. Consequently, I found myself dancing around in my terminology, opting for seemingly more positive or neutral terms such as career education, career schools, and career and technical education in my conversation with the admissions representative. The mutual colleague that introduced us asserted that this particular admissions counselor held strong potential in helping me since he, too, was interested in earning a doctorate and entering the non-profit sector. Nothing ever came of that introduction as the admissions representative stated his institution was mainly degree-granting, whereas I was looking for people who enrolled in sub-baccalaureate certificate or diploma programs.

After a period of floundering to explain my study to others who could potentially assist me in locating participants, I formally changed my terminology from for-profit
schools to career and technical education programs on all of my recruitment materials after consulting with Dr. Campano and Dr. Perna (see Appendix A, “After” example).

This seemed to make things a bit easier in framing the level of education I was interested in examining, but I still faced challenges in identifying participants for my study when it came to institutional context. Short-term career and technical education programs are not solely a facet of proprietary institutions; they exist at non-profit public and private institutions as well—most notably, the community college and independent entities such as the District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund. The complexity of locating people specifically enrolled at a for-profit school is made clear in an encounter I had with a person who ran adult education programs through a Pennsylvania Intermediate Unit (IU). We got into a friendly debate about the appropriateness of his adult education programs falling under the for-profit umbrella. I argued that because his programs were sponsored through the state, they were non-profit. He adamantly disagreed, stating that it was imperative for his programs to make money. That, in fact, these programs had to be revenue-generating, and hence qualified as being “for-profit education.”

The handful of encounters I described above serve as a glimpse of what I was hearing, seeing, and experiencing as I tried to launch this research. They were important contact experiences, so to speak, that revealed the greater complexity of a subject that I had underestimated as being much simpler. One of the most interesting and significant findings of my research on adult postsecondary choice was that the term for-profit education would be so problematic in itself. As described in the introduction section above, I discovered there was a lack of consistency in people’s uptake of this
terminology. For those who were familiar with for-profit education, they knew of the negative connotation associated with the label. Others, not so much in the know, were very unsure of the meaning and in many cases reported that they perceived all postsecondary institutions to be “for-profit.” As such, the complexity surrounding nomenclature brought to light a major assumption embedded in my research questions: that participants would know what a for-profit institution is and could readily recognize them as I could as a higher education insider.

As I discussed in the methodology section, I eventually landed an opportunity to recruit participants for this study from a single institution with the help of a friend. By this time, I had changed the nomenclature on my recruitment materials to reflect that I was seeking participants pursuing short-term career/occupational/trade programs to prevent having any further difficulties with the term for-profit. As I mentioned earlier, my recruitment materials had to work in my absence, although my institutional contact, Jordan, helped to cut through the potential red-tape of languaging by merely inviting students to participate in my study from his school. As I conducted this research, I generally felt that I had to walk a fine line. In one regard, I was concerned about potentially causing alarm in students about the for-profit status of their institution. Who knows what kind of bees’ nest would evolve from awakening those who might not understand what was inferred by that nomenclature? And really, I had no basis to believe that Pyramid was one of the bad apples, so I needed to be judicious about potentially upsetting people without just cause. Further, as all students were well beyond the non-penalty withdraw period, a significant financial loss would be incurred if they tried to exit
the school out of fear or anger prior to completing their programs. Thus, I treated the topic of for-profit education delicately by inserting a question or two that solicited participants’ thoughts in general about for-profit education, and in some instances, I directly referred to Pyramid as a for-profit institution. In the next section, I describe how Pyramid participants, in particular, experienced the languaging of for-profit education and how they made sense of Pyramid amidst various other school types available in the region. In the section that follows, I frame my discussion using James Gee’s (2008) notion of Discourses/discourses.

The Notion of “For-Profit”

Through the analysis of transcript data and conducting member checking with participants, I discovered that approximately half of my participants did not have an understanding of “for-profit education” (Gervais, Don, Whilomena, and Heaven). One participant, Tamara, said that she was familiar with the term for-profit education, but was uncertain that Pyramid fell under that umbrella of institutions. Two other students, Mack and Gervais, reported that they perceived all of postsecondary education to be “for-profit” and hence thought the implied distinction of schools to be a false one. I was not able to confirm how the remaining participant, Vivian, made sense of the for-profit status of Pyramid. However, I suspect that she was unaware of the for-profit moniker, as I will describe later. What follows is a description of how each participant experienced the discourse of for-profit education.
Gervais

From Gervais’s perspective, all postsecondary institutions were for-profit in nature, as highlighted below in an excerpt from Interview 2.

Excerpt 1: The Question of For-Profit

A: Uhmm. (0.5) Okay. So in terms of, so are you familiar with like for-profit, like, like career schools situated on the for-profit side--not all--uhm, to be like your Lincoln Techs, blah, blah, blah. Have you ever done any reading or anything about them?

G: You mean besides what program I wanted to join?

A: Mm-hmm

G: uhm

A: Have you ever like heard of any of the critiques or anything like that?

G: None that I find memorable.

A: okay

G: I think everything in this country is for profit.

A: [laughs]

G: So what are they talking about?

A: yeah

A: uh:m (long pause)

(Gervais, Interview 2, 6-23-14, Lines 781-794)

Although this excerpt was suggestive that Gervais was not aware of for-profit education given his pause before responding to my inquiry, I felt that I needed confirmation of my interpretation so I directly asked Gervais in a follow up phone conversation in November 2014 about this issue. I shared with Gervais a little more
information about the focus of my research on “for-profit” as a choice and that it appeared that participants of the study did not understand the notion of for-profit education. Gervais affirmed that he had not heard of the term “for-profit education” until I introduced it, and that it was through experiencing the closing of Pyramid that he learned about what I was inferring in my use of this terminology. I further inquired about his perception of the closing of the original school that Pyramid replaced, which he almost enrolled in prior to trying to enter the military. The following excerpt from my journal explains his thinking on that matter:

We briefly discussed the notion of for-profit (and I was transparent about my openness to various types of education and that all fps aren’t necessarily bad). He says that he thinks the schools hide that label because it has a really negative connotation to it. I agreed! He put it in massage terms that the term for-profit gives off negative energy. He also put 2-and-2 together about [his new school] being a for-profit school because it is owned by the XXXXX company, which owns a bunch of educational facilities/programs. I asked him about his reaction to hearing that [the school that Pyramid replaced] had closed and his willingness to sign up with Pyramid despite that. Gervais said that he thought it was somewhat odd that a school would go out of business, but he equated small career schools with small business, which often do go out of business. Really, however, he has little experience with “career schools.”

(Journal Entry, 11-22-14)

Gee’s (2008) assertions about the diverse meaning of “words” or “word combinations”—in this case, the term “for-profit education,” is made clear in how Gervais and I index two slightly different meanings of the same term. Although there is a shared understanding that educational institutions operate as a business to make money, my use of the term carries a far weightier definition of institutions that are unscrupulous in their revenue generating practices, which leads to harm to their students. Gervais
misses this meaning because, as Gee theorizes, Gervais is not a part of the Discourse community in which the term “for-profit education” has this alternative meaning. Using Gee’s theoretical framing of language as ideologically-infused with meaning, “for-profit education” in this research operates as a “socially contested” term (p. 24), which holds “value-laden distinctions” (p. 24).

Don

In the case of Don, although I was able to determine from the interview data that he recognized that there were differences between postsecondary institutions (college vs. career/trade schools), our understanding of Pyramid as a “for-profit” was not mutual. As with Gervais, my suspicions about Don’s understanding was largely inferred from our discussion of his choice process. Don later confirmed during our November 2, 2014 dinner meeting that he was in fact unfamiliar with the term for-profit education. It was only after experiencing the closing of Pyramid that he began to make a distinction about this segment of the postsecondary marketplace. Members of his church had tried to dissuade him from attending Pyramid, as I discussed in his case study chapter. However, he could not appreciate their warning since he really liked his experience and further, he was not open to advice from perceived naysayers.

Don was aware of local institutions such as the Community College of Philadelphia and Temple University. However, as I stated earlier, his use of the Internet was very influential in determining his choice set as Don mainly experienced his choice process in isolation. Given the proliferation of search engine optimization (SEO) practices, the likelihood of Don coming into contact with for-profit schools vs. non-profit
institutions seems rather high just from my own experimentation using his search terms “low budget” or “free nursing programs,” as he did.

During the interviews, Don vaguely referenced institutions in terms of their size (e.g., “the big colleges”) and the length of training required—similar to the way that Revelle’s (1997) participants categorized postsecondary institutions. Private, short-term training institutions, however, were already a familiar and legitimate pathway to getting a job, as he had done in the 1980s. Furthermore, the existence of highly reputable, private organizations such as District 1199C that also provide short-term training programs for people to enter health care professions, understandably might make it difficult for the average consumer to distinguish it from other potentially less-reputable organizations offering short-term training programs. Thus, it is no surprise that institutions with such outward similarities might make it difficult for the average education consumer to make distinctions between a “for-profit” vs. “non-profit” institution based on the nature of providing occupational training. I would argue that the final determination of an institution’s quality should not end merely on this distinction alone, as such labels can actually mask negative practices and outcomes occurring at non-profit institutions (e.g., low completion rates; poor advising structures, students’ long-term engagement in developmental education courses) (Bailey et al., 2001; Blumenstyk, 2015; Pew Charitable Trusts, 2015b; Rose, 2005, 2012; Tierney, 2013).

**Heaven**

In the case of Heaven, she too confirmed in a follow-up conversation that took place in June 2015, that she was unfamiliar with the term “for-profit education.”
Throughout my interactions with Heaven she mainly used the wording of “career schools” and “trade schools” in talking about this sector rather than the term “for-profit education” or “for-profit/proprietary schools.” As I described earlier in this chapter, Heaven had actually attended another “career school” in the 1990s, which was indeed a proprietary institution that has since gone out of business. Heaven’s evaluation of that experience was that “it didn't help me. It didn't pay off. It didn't do anything for me but take my money” (Interview 1, lines 199-200, 4-23-2014). Despite the negative experience Heaven reported having with that school, she shared in June 2015 that she was completely unaware of the general negative reputation surrounding many such career/trade postsecondary schools. Evidence of this was suggested in the following excerpt from Interview 2, in which Heaven disassociates herself from this issue when I finally directly asked her about for-profit institutions:

**Excerpt 2: It don’t affect me**

A: Yeah. No, you're right. Uhm (0.6) Okay. Any concern though, like, the differences between like, I'm sure you've heard like stuff about like ITT is being sued. Like the for-profit industry or anything like. (0.2) Any::

H: I never thought about that stuff, so I couldn't answer.

A: Okay. Uhm::

H: As long as it don't affect me, I couldn't answer.

A: She's li:ke

H: Whatever (laughs) Seriously.

(Heaven, Interview 2, lines 1693-1700, 4-30-14)

It was only after experiencing the closure of Pyramid Career School that Heaven says she learned about the discourse surrounding for-profit education, which is highly represented
amongst postsecondary career and trade schools (Heaven, personal communication, 6/25/15). As a side note, Bailey et al. (2001) report that by the early 1990s, proprietary institutions were commonly referred to as “trade schools” (p. 11), which coincides with Heaven’s understanding of her school type.

Tamara

Tamara was the fourth person whom I followed up with about her understanding of for-profit education. When I introduced the topic of for-profit schools in the course of our interview, she really did not respond to me, which led me to believe that she did not have an understanding of what I was talking about. My interpretation of her understanding rested on the fact that Tamara revealed herself to be a very knowledgeable person about a lot of different areas during the interview process. Further, she often elaborated on things she knew something about. When she virtually sat in silence as I talked about the for-profit industry, I perceived this disjuncture in our pattern of communication as an indication that she was not sure of what I was talking about and that she decided to politely listen rather than try to engage in something she was unfamiliar with. The excerpt that follows picks up on a discussion that Tamara and I were having about the quality of students she surprisingly encountered at Pyramid. One of the complaints she had was that too many of her fellow students were immature and unprepared to take advantage of what Pyramid had to offer. I used her observation as an opportunity to segue into a discussion about for-profit education, which did not go very far.
Excerpt: 3 Discussion Misfire on For-Profit Education

A: And I don't know how much you keep up with like reading about education and stuff like that but there's been a lot of like negative press about career schools in particular which a lot are for-profit institutions. Uhm I don't know, do you think there is institutional fault with some of the issues that happen around like the lack of success for some for-profits, not all for profits are bad, but there are quite a few that have gotten a lot of negative—like ITT is one that people or groups that's put up. I think the federal governments is looking into their practices, and stuff like that,

T: mm-hm

A: Uhm, but I hear you. No, there is a little bit of everything going on - I'm not sure if it's the institution - do you think institutionally they provide you what you came to get for the most part - I am hearing the additional support stuff isn't so great, but in terms of like content like do you feel you are getting what you came to get?

T: I think there's an interference in me getting what I came to get so I don't get as much as I should.

A: Okay. Gotcha

(Tamara, Interview 2, Lines 614-629, 5-5-14)

In August 2015, I reached out to Tamara to see if she would be willing to talk to me briefly to clarify my interpretation of her knowledge of for-profit education as it remained an irritating hunch. She graciously agreed to speak with me via phone. Tamara clarified that she had suspected that Pyramid was a for-profit institution when she enrolled; however, she was not actually certain of that for sure (personal communication, 8-21-15). Hence, my hunch was partly correct in that she did not know that Pyramid was a for-profit institution, and partly incorrect in that Tamara was indeed aware of this institutional type. She further revealed that her sister had attended the school that
Pyramid replaced, similar to Heaven. It was through the debacle of Pyramid’s untimely closing that Tamara says that she got confirmation about Pyramid’s “for-profit” status.

**Whilomena**

Whilomena, who had a lot of experience with short-term occupational training programs/trade school, typically just referred to herself as “going to school.” As a reminder to readers, she attended cosmetology school, a small for-profit to become a nursing assistant, and training to become a school bus driver. As she was one of my first interviewees, I did not directly question her about her knowledge of for-profit institutions as I was still testing out the waters, and quite frankly, I was more intrigued with some other things Whilomena expressed about her journey through life. Nonetheless, I was confident that she could distinguish Pyramid from a college through her conversation about one of her children having the opportunity to attend college. She also spoke of helping her second child enroll in a popular career school to complete a commercial driver’s license program.

I took a chance in calling Whilomena to see if she could clarify her knowledge of for-profit education, for it had been since November 2014 that I last spoke with her and I knew at that point her living situation was still not permanent. In that phone call, Whilomena clarified that she was not familiar with the term for-profit education, and nor did she know that Pyramid Career School was a for-profit institution. When I pressed about her perception of what the term “for-profit” meant, she phrased it matter of factly that schools relied on people paying tuition in order to remain open. If there is not enough money, then they cannot operate (Whilomena, personal communication, 9/13/15).
response, there was nothing sinister presumed about the idea of paying for learning or that education was a business.

During our conversation, I also learned that Whilomena had again enrolled in another for-profit career school to complete a medical assistant program. I asked if she knew whether her current school was deemed a for-profit institution, to which she responded that she did not know. The school, in fact, is a private licensed school authorized to operate in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Unlike some of the other participants, Whilomena actually completed her studies at Pyramid just prior to the institution’s closure. Therefore, I surmise that she did not have to route through information regarding the cancellation of her school loans or to arrange a “teach out” plan through another institution, which very likely would have made her more aware of this context of schooling at that point.

**Mack**

In my conversation with Mack, he acknowledged the indexical meaning of my use of the term “for-profit” education (Rymes, 2003), and added his own opinion about the matter, which was similar to Gervais’s statement that all schools are “for-profit.” In the rather long excerpt that follows, Mack shares his perspective about all postsecondary institutions being for-profit oriented. This conversation emanates from a discussion around the extra mile that the faculty went to help Mack get back on track following a serious illness, which caused him to miss many days of school. The start of this excerpt picks up on the end of my assertion that it was great that Pyramid was so accommodating because lots of schools often treat students with a sink or swim perspective.
Excerpt 4: All Schools are For-Profit

A: You know what I mean. So even community colleges, so you know there are some schools that really like have a low tolerance for—like it's our way or oh well, I guess you just didn't, you're not cut for this. I think that's a pervasive belief system and you have to find institutions that

M: Well I don't know how much I believe that=

A: mm-hm

M: =as much as I do they are getting money from several different sources, okay to

A: Who

M: I'm sorry?

A: Who?

M: The institutions, colleges, community colleges, trade schools, all of it meshed together okay are receiving money from several various sources. Grants, government grants, again, also personal monies, and

A: mmm-hmm

M: I think, again, this is one of those theories I can't prove, but it's just something I thought about, again this is something I thought about - they are getting all that money to have so many people in their-- whatever the system may be - their schooling system and they don't want to lose the incoming monies if they fail someone or that someone bottoms out, bums out, however you want to put it,=

A: mm-hm

M: so to their benefit as you've said earlier, they will raise hell and high water and move mountains to make sure that people graduate and people get the degree, the certification, the certificate, whatever it is they need to make sure they get that money coming in. Again, I think they have the economic motivation.

A: Are you saying higher education--post education broadly or specifically your context, like here?

M: I can't speak for uhm (0.3) other educational systems, for want of a better word, but over the years, okay, I've seen (0.3) okay where the money is and what those particular systems need to get the money. Okay let’s put it this way, when I went to school to [Community College] all those years ago to do the EMS, I only had to pay one flat rate and I was done.

A: Okay

M: Okay. Over the years as I've done what they call continuing education, yeah I've had to pay for certain classes, but it was you paid it, you did the class, you were done. Okay. Colleges and institutions, trade schools, (0.4) okay I will use
student loans, okay, those attract people saying, come on in, we'll teach you, we'll find you the job and you won't have to start paying until six months after you graduate. Okay. But what they don't tell you and if you don't look at it, okay, pardon me, in the small print is that during that six-month time frame, the interest is still accumulating okay.

A: oh yeah

M: It's at a very high rate so all of a sudden, if you don't look at it, okay you're not prepared to pay this rate. You go back and say this is what I thought I was paying. Then they say you signed this contract did you not? Yeah. Did you read it? Mmmmm. And then that's why a lot of people are going bankrupt. Colleges and institutions make money. That's all they do. Okay.

A: All schools?

M: If you graduate, they get their money. If you don't graduate, they get their money.

A: That's absolutely right.

M: So tell me what their motivation is. Is it their motivation to actually award degrees and doctorates or is it to make as much money as they can?

A: So all schools are pretty much you put in that basket?

M: After high school, I'd say yeah.

A: Wow.

M: Now a lot of people would call that a very cynical attitude=

A: Yeah

M: =but that's just what I noticed over the years, and I understand the cynicism, but that's what I've noticed over the years. Now that's just an opinion and you know what they say about opinions, so take it for what it is worth.

A: Point taken - so there is a vested interest in you being successful in this outfit

M: Absolutely, absolutely (0.9) absolutely

A: And that's the smart part for you to recognize that

M: Well it’s not that it didn’t come up on me

A: But to do something with it too, I mean you know how to operationalize it to work on your behalf

M: That's the thing

A: I think you do know

M: Thank you

A: I think you do know
M: Thank you. I appreciate it. **Don't take what I say yeah it’s cynical (.) but its life okay (.) everyone is entitled to make money okay.** There is a little piece of paper down in Washington DC that we are entitled to life liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Nobody says you get happiness. **You have to find it and get it or more importantly if you are going to be successful you have to make it. And if it cost you so much to do so and you are willing to pay that, so much the better.**

A: Right.
A: Gotcha.

(Mack, Interview 1, Lines 464-531, 4-17-14)

This patch of transcript from my interview with Mack offers an interesting assessment of all postsecondary education as being entrepreneurially focused. Very noticeably, he includes me as a doctoral student in his references, which occurred a few times during our interviews. Despite couching postsecondary education as a money-making enterprise across the board, he accepts this condition as a way of life—and as part of getting ahead in a competitive society.

**Vivian**

Although I have strong suspicions that Vivian was unaware of the term for-profit education or that Pyramid was even classified in this way, I was not able confirm this through member checking. In my conversations with Vivian, she referenced Pyramid in terms of it being a “career/trade school,” and in some instances seemed to struggle in articulating classifying Pyramid amongst other institutional types (e.g., community college, 4-year college), which she was quite familiar with from her own experience (and is alluded to in *Excerpt* 7 in this chapter). For example, in the interviews, she often employs the term “this kind of school” in trying to describe Pyramid’s distinct advantages for her life.
As I reviewed the transcripts, my own uneasiness in discussing for-profit education is glaring. I tend to fumble in my wording as I tried to elicit participants’ understandings of for-profit education—fearful that I might create a disruption in that environment that could bring my research to a screeching halt. Although I became more comfortable with the interview process after completing the first two sets of interviews, I realized that I remained conditioned by the Lincoln Tech experience in that talking about for-profit education in this setting could end badly. It did not, however. In fact, the interview process was rather enjoyable on my part and the participants, who often thanked me for the opportunity to chat about their experiences.

**Recognition of Institutional Types**

Although participants may have been unaware of the notion of for-profit education as a category of schooling, they were all aware that Pyramid was not a college or university. One person with whom I discussed my findings asserted that students she knew often confused sub-baccalaureate for-profit institutions with being “in college.” In the case of my research, all seven of my participants knew that there was a distinction between community college, 4-year colleges, and “career/trade schools”—the preferred nomenclature participants often used to reference Pyramid Career School and institutions offering similar programs. In fact, participants were quick to point out what made attending a “trade school” or “career school” a much better option for them rather than a pursuing what they perceived as vague, lengthy, and impersonal degree programs ill-suited for their immediate needs. Excerpts from both Mack and Vivian highlight this perception:
Excerpt 5: No BS Courses

A: Did you look at any other options aside from here - what was your search process?

M: Number one it was convenient to where I live, number 2, I really didn't want to go through, again the degree program, the 3 the 4 year degree program because I didn't want to take what I considered, and forgive my phrasology, the BS courses, okay, um no disrespect to anyone who is doing that. You know I wish them all the success in the world, but that's just not for me.

A: Okay

M: You know I can't see taking English Comp 101 okay when I'm trying to save lives, okay and yeah I have to write a report on what I did, but I don't need

A: English 101

M: English 101 to do that. Exactly.

A: mm-hm

M: So, like I said no disrespect to you or anyone else who has done that or is doing that

A: Oh no none taken

M: I wish you all the luck in the world, but it's just not for me. This worked out extremely well okay - I was able to learn more about the medical field

A: Um-hum

(Mack, Interview 1, 4-17-14, Lines 43-58)

Excerpt 6: When You Feel Apart...

V: And-and this school particularly was good I think for me and her

A: mm-hmm

V: You know what I mean

A: How so?
V: Because-uhm-I think it allowed you to be you for, you know what I mean like, you don't totally get lost, you know what I mean

A: okay

V: It's a fast pace, but it's like, oh I gotta do this. Like at school, when I was at uhm Community and the other school it's like a lot of people, nobody notices if you really--you know what I mean

A: [You sink or swim and] you sorta like

V: [laughs]

V: You can fall off and no problem, you know, and that's what, you know, kind of happened, but this time it was more. And I think when you're kind of--when you feel apart

A: mm-hmm

V: It kind of helps you, you, you see yourself in that, so, you know. I think that is the main thing.

(Vivian, Interview 1, Lines 501-519, 4-18-14)

…

Excerpt 7: These Kinds of Schools

V: You know, and I think these kinds of schools or a two-year college or something kind of may build those kind of skills for people that haven't been, you know

A: Mm-hmm

V: in school for a moment

A: So, you found that the [support that you get here is ]-is-actually fills the need

V: [mm-hmm, mm-hmm, m-hm]

(Vivian, Interview 1, Lines 456-463, 4-18-14)

As I was beginning to write my thesis, I shared with Dr. Perna my finding around the languaging of for-profit education, to which she thought was interesting given a
situation she encountered at a meeting with higher education representatives in California, in which the for-profit institutions in attendance asserted their preference of being called “private sector education” (L. Perna, personal communication, 12-4-14). In conjunction with my own languaging encounters as described earlier, Dr. Perna’s story made me think about the many alternative labels I have noted used to reference for-profit postsecondary institutions such as “career colleges,” “career schools,” “trade schools,” “occupational training centers,” “institutes,” “academies,” and simply “schools.” In the state of Pennsylvania, the Department of Education uses the term “private licensed schools,” which I had never heard before (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Department of Education, 2014). Given the range of ways in which different stakeholders appear to refer to proprietary post-secondary institutions, it is no surprise that people’s knowledge of “for-profit education” is so inconsistent despite the ubiquity of critiques circulating about the abuses that have occurred in this sector (Natale, Lebertella, & Doran, 2013; Tierney, 2013). It further underscored the importance of where one is situated in the world in order to experience certain discourses, as the languaging of this segment of postsecondary education is rather un-uniform. As Gee (2008) and Rymes (1996, 2002) highlight, recognizing language meaning largely depends on a shared social history.

As I pondered about my findings in this section of my research, it dawned on me that an interesting dynamic existed in the way in which the “for-profit” moniker was used and recognized. First and foremost, for-profit institutions themselves do not generally embrace the label of “for-profit” in presenting themselves to the world, as was the case with Pyramid Career School. As a matter of fact, nowhere in their advertisements (e.g.,
catalog, website, etc.) is this term ever employed. Instead the school provides a simple statement about ownership: “Pyramid Career School, location, is controlled by XXXX, which is a subsidiary of XXXX.” Hence the label of “for-profit” is created and used by outsiders of the for-profit community—mainly those situated on the “traditional,” not-for-profit side of higher education (and their advocates), as a way to exclude for-profit institutions as legitimate entities in the postsecondary marketplace (Trivett, 1973, 1975). Perceivably, the term “non-for-profit education” suggests notions of integrity, academic rigor, benevolence or a civic-oriented purpose (Bailey et al., 2001; Natale et al., 2013). Whereas the term “for-profit education,” however, suggests that people are in the business of education for personal gain without any genuine care about preparing students for productive futures—although this is not always the case (Bailey et al., 2001; Natale et al., 2013). Fundamentally, the mere association of monetary gain in the context of education is tacitly taboo (Stevens & Kirst, 2015).

As indicated in this research, the label of “for-profit” is not readily interpreted in the same way amongst various individuals. Gee (2008) speaks to this in his assertion that in communicative encounters, word “meanings are ultimately rooted in negotiation between different social practices with different interests by people who share or seek to share some common ground,” thus “the negotiations which constitute meaning are limited by values emanating from “communities” (p. 12). Rymes (1996) similarly talks about the referent aspect of language meaning and how interlocutors assert “different referential value” to words (p. 156). Exactly who is included in the broader “communities” that Gee (2008) speaks of is a complicated thing to sort out, as I
discovered in thinking about the languaging of for-profit education by various stakeholders. Gee offers the following interpretation of “community” as “attempts by people to establish and stabilize, perhaps only for here and now, enough common ground to agree on meaning” (p. 12). In my conversations with Gervais and Mack, I explicitly and implicitly agreed (respectively) with their reinterpretations of “for-profit” as I have also noted the entrepreneurial turn of the supposed not-for-profit side of postsecondary education over time. Even so, I am also cognizant of the other meaning of “for-profit education” as beyond being entrepreneurial, but simply fraudulent delivery systems of education.

Beyond the good school-bad school dichotomy seemingly present in these labels, the term for-profit is not necessarily taken up in the way many in the non-profit education sector intended it to be, as illustrated in Whilomena’s summation of “for-profit” education, Gervais’s case study, and Mack’s comments presented earlier in this chapter. Instead, these participants lump all of postsecondary education as businesses operating “for profit,” and they are not the only people I have encountered with this understanding. This third reading seemingly works against the non-profit education community that instituted the term “for-profit education,” and implicates the non-profit sector of education as being similarly dubious. Rymes (2003) describes this remaking of language meaning as a form of entailment, in which in this case, a new context is created for interpreting the term for-profit education (p. 125). The reinscripted meaning of the term for-profit by some participants is a powerful commentary regarding the way in which
people perceive higher education in the 21st century, and further demonstrates the instability of language meaning (Gee, 2008).

As indicated in participants’ responses to the notion of for-profit education, this particular institutional type had no bearing on their decision to attend Pyramid Career School, largely because students did not recognize Pyramid as such, and nor did they understand the ideological meaning of “for-profit education” that not-for-profit education advocates intend to be conveyed. As far as most students were concerned, Pyramid was merely a school—a trade or occupational training center—to be exact. And further, participants understood that attending school generally costs money, so the idea that education was a business and that sometimes people do not always get out of education what they want, was no surprise to them as this seemed to be what was occurring in the larger domain of postsecondary education (Van Horn, 2013).

Continuing Gee’s (2008) notion of “Discourses” as a theoretical framework, I discuss in the next section of this chapter the way in which Pyramid Career School presented itself to the world as a legitimate education provider. Aside from applying the construct of Discourses to just people, I believe that organizations similarly orchestrate themselves within Discourses, as Riessman’s (2008) opening quote in the next section suggests.
Pyramid’s Self-Constructed Identity as an Education Provider

As persons construct stories of experience, so too do identity groups, communities, nations, governments, and organizations construct preferred narratives about themselves” (Riessman, 2008, p. 7).

I thought about what the languaging of “for-profit” looked in practice, and configured the above model in Figure 2 that represents the communication breakdown I see occurring between students\(^4\) (or “communities” as Gee frames interlocutors), the for-profit education sector, and what I call the vanguards of non-profit higher education. As with the general issue of access to postsecondary education, many people simply lack in-depth knowledge about this arena. In fact, postsecondary education is a rather complicated terrain to navigate, from figuring out financial aid and cost of attendance to

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\(^4\) And other individuals unfamiliar with “for-profit” education
actually fulfilling degree requirements (Rosenbaum et al., 2006). It literally represents a type of literacy practice of its own for individuals to learn and negotiate, as well as a particular Discourse community to which people associate themselves. Further, from personal experience, I find that many people generally do not understand the diverse landscape of postsecondary schools available and the mission to which institutions ground themselves. As such, defining who has membership in particular Discourse communities is difficult to exactly map out. In the variety of people I talked to throughout this research, confusion about what is inferred by the term “for-profit education” cuts across age, racial, gender, educational level and socioeconomic class divisions. Even those who work in education are sometimes unaware of what is meant by the term “for-profit education.”

As Gee (2008) highlights in his theorizing of how interlocutors come to an agreement about word meanings, it is difficult to precisely define who is an insider vs. an outsider to the Discourse community in which for-profit education is perceived as a negative entity. Nonetheless, the participants of this study were largely situated outside of the Discourse community of what I term the vanguards of higher education. Thus, they missed the negative message from the vanguards of higher education about for-profit education, although the vanguards of higher education appear to be in an ongoing contentious dialogue with for-profit education.

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15 My definition of vanguards of non-profit education includes all institutions and individuals who are advocates and supporters of non-profit education, and profess an ideological stance against for-profit education.
As I began to think about the ways in which study participants viewed and identified Pyramid Career School as an education provider, which was rather positive and in contrast to mainstream interpretations of proprietary institutions, I decided to explore the way in which Pyramid presented itself to the world (i.e., to potential students). What identity did Pyramid project about itself as an education provider and how? Although not an exhaustive account, through my analysis of various data described earlier, the following prominent themes emerged: Pyramid is “a real school;” Pyramid is “different from the rest” (i.e., other for-profits); Pyramid is “student-centered;” education at Pyramid is about “becoming work/career ready;” and finally, Pyramid is a “second chance” institution.

Pyramid as a “real school”

One of the first things I wanted to explore was the way in which Pyramid framed itself as a “legitimate school,” as this seems to be an underlying critique of the value of for-profit education (Kinser, 2006b). I gravitated toward this theme as a result of multiple scholars’ discussions about the perceived illegitimacy of for-profit education, as well as the circulating discourses abound in the general media. Thus, I looked for evidence that might convey legitimacy. In the interviews, participants spoke to many features themselves, which helped guide my analysis of document and artifacts. From my analysis of various collected data, the following factors helped to establish Pyramid as a legitimate education provider: accreditation, the ability to participate in state and federal financial aid programs; the school setting; the professionally developed website and catalog describing Pyramid and its programs; a business-like setting with professional-
looking staff, and the employment of business protocols. I describe each of these factors in detail below.

**Accreditation.** Tamara, in particular asked Pyramid representatives about their accreditation, which was prominently featured in the school entryway, catalog, and website. In asking this question, she was following a best practice in evaluating the legitimacy of the school (Torpey, 2012). Pyramid had a license from the state authorizing its ability to offer educational programs, and it was accredited by the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, which is recognized by the federal Department of Education, and allowed Pyramid to participate in Title IV financial programs. Pyramid also was a member of two other perceivably significant associations.

**The Ability to Participate in Financial Aid Programs.** Another important element that suggests legitimacy is the fact that Pyramid was authorized to participate in student aid programs, which participants spoke of. Students could access state and federal grants, loans, and work-study as with any not-for-profit institution. Connections to government agencies, such as the federal Department of Education, is indeed a powerful sign of legitimacy. In fact, various scholars have articulated that the 1972 Amendment to the Higher Education Act of 1965 was very significant in elevating the legitimacy of the for-profit sector by including such schools under the heading of “postsecondary education,” and subsequently making them eligible to participate in Title IV funding (Clowes, 1995; Kinser, 2006b; Trivett, 1973, 1975).
**Admissions Process.** The fact that applicants went through an admissions process (albeit not a rigorous one) also suggested legitimacy, as this conveyed that Pyramid had “standards.” In the Bureau of Labor Statistics guide on certificate programs (Torpey, 2012), students are urged to evaluate schools on the basis of them having an admissions process. Whilomena and Don each spoke of instances where they were not admitted to schools before. Aside from completing an application for admission and an interview, there was a brief assessment given to students, and every person had to submit proof of high school graduation. Some students also underwent a criminal background check due to the types of fields they wanted to pursue.

**Professional Setting.** Mack discussed his evaluation of the school was based on how the classrooms were set up and the importance of seeing things such as skeletons and other models and charts of the human anatomy available for instruction. Similarly, Gervais liked the set-up he saw on the tour for massage therapy. The facility spoke to him that Pyramid would indeed offer an *applied learning* experience.

In general, the physical setting in which Pyramid was situated appeared professional and school-like. It was located in a fairly large building amongst nearby businesses, and it had its own parking lot for commuters. Further, it had what I perceived to be permanent and expensive signage on the street level and on the outside of the building the school occupied. From my purview, there was nothing makeshift about its appearance—suggesting stability. On the interior, the space was unexpectedly large and sprawling, which was not apparent from outside. There was ample office and classroom space throughout the complex, some of which appeared unused.
Overall, the school appeared tidy although a little wear-and-tear was observed in some areas. The hallways and classrooms were bright and filled with lots of positive messages about achievement, goal-setting, graduation, the importance of education, and where to get help. The message that was most pervasive was that of graduating and the life potential awaiting students thereafter. In the middle of the complex, there was a huge wall display of diplomas and a cap and gown that was pinned to the wall. There was absolutely no missing this display. I found it to be a particularly powerful visual each time I visited the school. And from what I heard from participants, there was always a focus on life after completing Pyramid.

When visitors arrived to the building they were greeted by a receptionist who required each person to fill in their name, phone number, etc. on a visitor’s log. Visitors were then invited to sit in a waiting area that rivaled what I have seen in various doctors’ offices. There were cushioned chairs, end tables with lamps, and a coffee table with an array of popular magazines available to read. Most prominent, however, was the large flat screen television that continuously played an advertisement about the family of schools under Pyramid’s parent company.

Lastly, the staff was very professional in the way that they handled themselves. They wore business attire, or at least dressed in a business casual manner. The four staff members that I interacted with all had at least a bachelor’s degree. One consistent comment that participants made was about the way in which the staff interacted with them in an engaging manner. In contrast, Gervais recounted other schools not even returning his calls. Vivian was impressed that the director of the school met with her
during her visit to the campus. Like any good sales team, the Pyramid staff responded to participants as valued customers, and virtually all participants reported a very positive experience when they inquired about Pyramid’s programs.

**Different from the Rest**

All of the staff members I talked to were aware of the negativity surrounding their school type, and in some way or another articulated ways in which Pyramid differed from the “bad apples.” Jordan, my contact at Pyramid, acknowledged that indeed a stigma was associated to for-profit education, citing that even his own alma mater refused to let him recruit students because “career schools” were perceived to be “predators” (personal communication, 6/25/14). He also pointed out other area schools that he deemed to truly represent the negative side of for-profit education for their practices of panhandling students off the street and admitting students regardless if they were a good fit for the institution’s programs. Jordan’s faculty member colleague told me that Pyramid, was a “country club” in comparison to many of their competitors in the region—acknowledging that although they were not perfect, he perceived them to be above many others in the for-profit universe of institutions (Instructor, personal communication, 4/10/14).

Similarly, Eden, Jordan’s admissions colleague, asserted that Pyramid was different from the bad apples in the for-profit education sector. She cited leaving a job she had at another institution because their practices conflicted with her values (Eden, personal communication 4/19/14).
Against the report of for-profit institutions expending large amounts of money in advertising (Allen, 2014; Zamani-Gallaher, 2004), Jordan stated that Pyramid operated against this trend. He reported that management saw Pyramid as different from other for-profit schools. First, they did not believe in wasting money on advertising, but instead, relied on representing the school through a strong Internet marketing strategy. Jordan went so far as to make an analogy between Pyramid and Harvard, in that it was perceived to be more “dignified” if students came to them rather than the school chase after students (personal communication, 6/25/14). This mindset, he states, required admissions counselors to work extra hard to recruit on their own. Numbers, he conceded, were “very important” for sure, and he hinted disapproval of some colleagues’ actions to sometimes meet the demand. My reading of this conversation is that my contact chose his words carefully. I believe that he was the ethical person he purported to be, and that something about the institution’s new corporate management made him uncomfortable. In fact, he had already accepted a new position elsewhere at the time of this phone interview.

Pyramid as Student Centered

Closely aligned to the second-chance opportunity theme is Pyramid’s depiction of itself as a “student-centered” institution. Stories of going beyond the extra mile in supporting students were frequent across my study participants, the staff, and the video testimonials. In fact, this is theme appeared to be the most prominent and deliberately articulated identity Pyramid conveyed of itself. As articulated in Mack’s account of how accommodating his teachers were in allowing him to make up missed time and assignments due to his illness, the admissions counselors discussed instances where they
provided bus fare to students who could not get to school otherwise. They also helped students devise a plan for getting on their feet as some arrived to the school under particularly dire circumstances. In part, the admissions representatives were part social worker, guidance counselor, and retention specialist as described by all accounts. Their role did not end once the student was admitted; they continued to maintain a relationship with students through the completion of their curriculum as part of their retention plan. Another visible component of the student-centered theme was Pyramid’s desire for students to be successful, as heavily portrayed in the video testimonies below.

“They will do ANYTHING just to make sure that you are happy and get the job that you need.”

“They really do want you to learn. And they want you to have the best education you can get so you can succeed in life.”

“They do whatever they can to help you better yourself and achieve your career goals.”

“It feels at home to me here. The faculty was very, very supportive from beginning to end.”

(Transcribed from Pyramid Career School’s Online Promo video, n.d.)

Notably, students and alumni making the testimonials came across as relatable, everyday people. They were also a diverse group (e.g., African American, White, Latino, overweight, young, middle-aged, male, female, English Language Learners) who recounted stories of formerly feeling frustrated and unhopeful about their status in life, or in some cases just talked about the ambitions they had. Well represented were stories of individuals who overcame doubts of being capable enough to complete education and training, to which the credit was often bestowed to Pyramid or its sister institution for
providing the supportive and nurturing environment that facilitated their accomplishments.

Most participants of this study also cited many instances where they were patiently supported in learning new concepts and how they felt empowered as learners, often for the first time in their lives (e.g., Don, Vivian, Heaven). Participants repeatedly shared instances with me of how they were experiencing being back in the classroom after a long period of time. Most participants were older adults and were apprehensive about being too rusty to be good students now. Reportedly, however, the instructors were very skillful in their teaching. The growing confidence that I heard Vivian, Don, Heaven, speak about was notable. The Medical Billing and Coding instructor that I connected with appeared to have a gift with leading an intergenerational classroom as MBC participants often reflected about what they were experiencing in his course. With the exception of Tamara, who grew impatient having to wait for tutoring that virtually never came because of students with greater needs, study participants appreciated their instructors and the learning environments instructors fostered. Hence the notion of care and support that was part of the institutional ethos espoused in Pyramid’s promotional media, also appeared to be lived in the daily work of individual staff members, the people who represent the organization. This message of being student centered played out very importantly at the admissions phase where Vivian talked about the staff “could see me for me” –i.e., accepting her where she was and being willing to help her “go through the motions” (Interview 1, 4-18-14). Rosenbaum et al.’s (2006) research highlights the value of this kind of supportive hand-holding for students unfamiliar with the norms of postsecondary
education. Don made a similar observation about feeling accepted in his admissions interview with Jordan, where he described feeling able to himself: “…he was low-key. Uh: Just let you sit there and be yourself” (Interview 1, 3-31-14).

A more critical reading of this experience, however, might reflect that Pyramid staff are trained to use psychology to connect with vulnerable individuals to lure them into programs which may or may not lead to the outcomes that students desire. Campbell and Deil-Amen’s (2012) exploration of “the admissions encounter” (p. 4) at Chicago-area for-profit institutions highlights the way in which traditional-age students’ inexperience with postsecondary education and career pathways is methodically exploited in the recruitment process.

**Education/training for the Purpose of Work/Career Readiness**

Pyramid was very clear about linking education to accessing jobs. The mission statement was explicit in stating the institutions purpose is to enable graduates to obtain entry-level jobs. Further, the school’s catalog heavily cites U.S. government labor statistics and job trends in the local economy in framing the potential outcomes of graduating from one of Pyramid’s training programs. There have been ongoing debates about the purposes for education with some arguing that education should serve a more noble cause, such as creating good citizenship, critical thinking and simply making people more education (Bailey et al., 2001; Carr, 2013, Persell & Wenglinsky, 2004). Pyramid, however, unapologetically spoke to the narrative of education as a route to social mobility and as a means for acquiring a specific job or career path. Further, Pyramid made sure to emphasize the hands-on nature of its training, which was very
important to many participants of this study. As mentioned earlier, the facility appeared equipped with the resources perceived instrumental in preparing students for their future careers.

One critique I uncovered in this narrative of purpose was the inconsistency of personnel available in the career services center. Some students shared their anxiety about obtaining externship placement and became diligent about pursuing their own connections with potential employers as a back-up plan. Externship was perceived by students to be a significant part their potential to find work following graduation from Pyramid. Thus, the less than stellar performance in this area was notable. While I was conducting my research, Pyramid Career School had an active posting to hire a new director for the career services center.

**A Second Chance Institution**

Consistent with what I heard his two admissions colleagues describe, Jordan framed Pyramid as a “second chance” institution (6/25/14)—an opportunity for people to get on their feet again, which is exactly what many of my research participants described themselves wanting (6/25/14). Eden articulated that she saw her job as helping people who are “at risk” with finding an opportunity to improve themselves (personal communication, 4/19/14). Fermina, the other admissions representative, similarly depicted Pyramid as an institution that truly understood the plight of people who were struggling to establish themselves (4/19/14). She had a woman in mind for me to interview, who had overcome drug addiction; however, I did not follow up to confirm the woman’s willingness to participate in this research.
This notion of providing second chances and an opportunity, in general, for people to better their life circumstances was a strong and consistent theme portrayed in Pyramid’s institutional identity. It was also recognizable in Pyramid’s mission statement, which was short and direct about the purposes of a Pyramid Career School education: to obtain a job. The testimonial video that aired online and in the reception area further emphasized Pyramid’s mission of helping people overcome adversity as depicted in the excerpts below:

“They gave me an opportunity really to get my life back on track.”

“By me being a single mother by myself with a 1-year-old son. (0.4) It just shows that It—it shows him that I can be something better—that you can accomplish anything that you want.”

“I’m very proud of myself. It’s::: (long pause) It’s an accomplishment that I didn’t think I could ever EVER do. But I did it.”

In essence, Pyramid conveyed itself as a place that accepted students unconditionally and with a commitment to helping students get over whatever challenges they were dealing with.

Summary

In this chapter I addressed the second part of my research questions pertaining to the languaging of for-profit education. In particular, I explored how a small group adults in the Philadelphia region experienced the discourse of for-profit education and the way in which this influenced participants’ decision to matriculate at Pyramid Career School, a sub-baccalaureate, non-degree granting for-profit institution dedicated to preparing individuals for entry-level jobs.
As I was developing my dissertation proposal for this study, I assumed that potential participants would recognize their institution as falling within this controversial field of institutions, and that the decision to enroll in this school represented agency and possibly a critical stance to the mantra of “college for all” from their situated contexts (Campano & Damico, 2007; Kiyama, 2010). What I found quite unexpectedly was that the term “for-profit education” was differently interpreted across variously situated people. In some spaces, it is a highly contested label; in other spaces, it spoke to what people perceived as the obvious: that postsecondary education is a business regardless of how an institution categorizes itself (e.g., not-for-profit or for-profit). Surprisingly, almost all participants seemed unaware that Pyramid Career School was a for-profit institution (Mack was the exception). And in many cases (5 out of 7 participants), they had no idea of what a for-profit school was, nor did they seem to care if they did understand the meaning I was asserting. In the mind of some participants, all schools were “for-profit.” In essence, the ideological meaning behind the term “for-profit education” was largely unknown to participants despite the ubiquity of critiques of “for-profit education” circulating in the media.

Aside from my research participants, I found that many people in the general public were also unaware of the meaning of “for-profit education.” Although traditional higher education bases much of its integrity on the condition of being not-for-profit (i.e., not out to make money), my research suggests that this distinction is not a strong one amongst various education consumers. With the rising costs of education and the strong marketing presence of higher education everywhere, “not-for-profit” institutions appear
similarly entrepreneurial. As I have talked to various education professionals as I was doing this research, a number of people acknowledged the entrepreneurial nature of their “not-for-profit” institutions.

What makes this particular finding of my research unique is that as I have read across various scholar’s investigations of students’ choice of for-profit, researchers appear to forego any discussion of what for-profit education actually means to participants. More so, researchers appear to implicitly assert the distinction between for-profit and non-profit in their inquiries with students. Reading Revelle’s (1997) dissertation reminded me of my own journey throughout this research process. In her dissertation research on non-traditional students’ pursuit of for-profit institution training, Revelle transparently ponders about her own values in asking students “How did you get here?” (p. 201-202). The word “here,” she reflects, was explicitly intended to index the proprietary institutions under study as an undesirable choice; however, her assumptions and ideological perspective were never explicitly communicated, as she later explains:

What had I really been asking when, after a few preliminary background questions, I quired, “How did you get here?” I essentially was asking of Keisha and all the others, “How did you make this unusual choice?” I was also asking, “Why didn’t you choose to go to college instead of proprietary school?” At a more specific level, my unstated question was, “Why didn’t you choose to enroll in a community college, most of which offer, at far lower cost, programs similar to those available in proprietary schools?” Informing my questions were both the value I had placed on traditional “college education” in my own life, and my assumption that proprietary schools were not colleges.

(Revelle, 1997, p. 201-202)
As Revelle (1997) describes, a mutual understanding of the discourse surrounding “for-profit” education is left unexplored with participants, underscoring Mishler’s (1986) assertions that “the topics of discourse and meaning must be restored to a central place in our theoretical and empirical studies of human experience and action” (preface, p. x). As my findings highlight, the term for-profit education has multiple shades of meaning; thus, my research underscores that careful scrutiny of language with differently situated research informants must be diligently pursued. Gee’s (2008) arguments about language use also speaks to this emphasis.

Finally, piggybacking off of the languaging of “for-profit,” I sought to understand how Pyramid communicated itself as a legitimate education provider. I already knew how for-profit institutions were negatively depicted in the media, but it seemed relevant given the nature of my research questions to explore how one such institution—Pyramid Career School, in this case—constructed its own identity (Czarniawska, 1997; Riessman, 2008). Using James Gee’s (2008) notion of Discourses as identity kits, I sought to understand how Pyramid attempted to get recognized amongst a sea of institutional choices in the Philadelphia region. From the standpoint of participants, Pyramid communicated itself well in response to their needs on the way in and in some aspects of their actual experience there. Indicators of legitimacy (e.g., accreditation, physical setting, professional staff and business-like practices), student centeredness, and a focus on job/career training rather than superfluous academic learning were some of the prominent ways Pyramid Career School defined itself as a worthwhile educational choice for these participants.
In essence, Pyramid Career School was able to successfully situate itself amongst the “college for all” discourse that participants felt rather than heard. And agentically, they pursued postsecondary education according to circumstances pertaining to age, global changes in how employers treat employees, personal assessments of academic ability, perceptions of affordability, and their own personal desires and interests.
The goal of my inquiry was to learn about how individuals made the choice to enroll at a for-profit postsecondary institution against the backdrop of a seemingly negative discourse occurring about this body of schools and in the context of the “college-for-all” movement (Allen, 2014; Gearan, 2012; Kinser, 2006b; Natale et al., 2015; Tierney, 2013). Although there have been many accounts written about the horrors of for-profit postsecondary institutions (i.e., the aftermath of enrollment), very little has been written about the decision making process of those who elect to attend these institutions (i.e., the beforehand aspect). As “college choice” scholarship frames educational decision making as a product of one’s life history, I used narrative research to explore this phenomenon. Through the gathering of participants’ stories about their childhood, experiences in basic education, family, prior postsecondary experiences, work history, and reasons why they enrolled at Pyramid at this time of their lives, I assembled a rich dataset to which I was able to analyze and create an understanding of how a small body of adults experienced this phenomenon.

Rather than employ a deficit lens towards participants’ decision-making, I approached this research with an open-minded stance in that I might uncover really thoughtful perspectives about what made this option perceivably suitable for participants. I wanted to understand the value learners saw in for-profit education that perhaps mainstream audiences (including myself, given my longstanding participation in higher
education) might be overlooking due to our ideological beliefs about educational attainment.

As I identified earlier, I have been a college access worker formally and informally for much of my adult life; therefore, I had an interest in better understanding an area of postsecondary education that more and more traditionally under-represented students are opting to enroll in rather than seemingly more affordable and potentially “better” choices (Kena et al., 2015; Deming, Godin, & Katz, 2013; Tierney, 2013). I also anticipated I might find participants’ perspectives to be a critical response to the robust college for all movement that has taken shape in the United States, yet I was unsure of what their reasons might be.

As I read “college choice” scholarship in preparation of my research, I noted a lack of attention given to understanding adults’ experiences within existing “college” choice models despite the healthy presence adult students enrolled in undergraduate education for several decades now (Oseguera & Malagon, 2011; Thomas, 2005). As Deil-Amen (2011) underscores, there has remained for too long an emphasis on traditional-age students, when in reality the diversity of postsecondary attendees is quite extensive beyond the usual categories of race, gender, full-time status, and enrollment at residential, 4-year colleges. And as Tublin (2002) found in his master’s thesis on the college choice of adults pursuing four-year degrees, the literature was rather thin. Perna (2006) similarly acknowledged this gap in “college” choice scholarship. Assessing that I had quite a bit of anecdotal knowledge about adults pursuing postsecondary education already, this
research presented itself as an opportunity to learn about this phenomenon (postsecondary choice) from an empirical standpoint.

Yet, amid the lack of scholarship addressing adult’s experiences with postsecondary choice, a notable gap existed in exploring how individuals pursued sub-baccalaureate credentials (certificates, career diplomas, associate’s degrees) as well. This is an area that has seen notable growth since the turn of the century (Chung, 2008, 2009; Horn & Li, 2009; Osegeura & Malagon, 2011; Tierney, 2013). In the Philadelphia metropolitan region, there is still very much a strong push toward four-year degree completion, making conversations about sub-baccalaureate education—in general—a neglected issue despite employment trends suggesting opportunities for those graduating with specialized skills from applied associate’s degrees and certificate programs (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012; Carnevale et al., 2013; Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010; Horn & Li, 2009; Van Horn, 2015). Even more concerning was what I found to be little conversation about the presence of a multitude of for-profit career training schools in the region, which seemingly enjoyed healthy enrollments. This reflects what Trivett (1975) described decades ago as the shunning of for-profit education by advocates of traditional higher education (or vanguards of higher education, as I have described in Chapter 8). I do understand the gravity of low educational attainment in the Philadelphia region, so my assessment of the bachelor’s degree push is not meant to be dismissive of the importance
of this goal. More so, I see the need for a more inclusive approach for those not ready or able to pursue this step, as most participants of this research demonstrate.

The term referencing scholarship concerned with the phenomenon of individuals’ postsecondary educational pathways is commonly known as “college choice.” In this thesis, I have made an argument, however, to reconsider this terminology as it fails to be inclusive of the full range of postsecondary pathways individuals might take—as is the case of this research which focused on students’ selection of a non-degree granting context. Although somewhat of a mouthful, I employ the term postsecondary choice as it is more inclusive in its meaning.

Sub-baccalaureate level education has only recently become a welcomed and nurtured goal in the U. S. educational attainment agenda (Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010; Bailey & Belfield, 2013; Horn & Li, 2009; Perna, 2013; Rosenbaum et al., 2006), and in the context of for-profit education, scholars had already begun to identify significant differences amongst 2-year, less-than-2-year, and 4-year for-profit institutions (Cellini, 2005; Chung, 2009; Kinser, 2006a, 2006b). Therefore, my exploration of this context seems timely as postsecondary education access workers, lawmakers, scholars, students and their families, and institutional leaders ponder about this area of education going forward.

My research questions, in the end, centered on the process, resources, and factors related to adults, age 25 and older, who decided to further their education. Although the

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16 For a long time, I have been an advocate for sub-baccalaureate education after an encounter with a corporate sponsor of a program I ran.
term “non-traditional students” is often used to identify those who differ from traditional-age students, I intentionally used the term adult for my focus was really about the time and distance of participants’ decision making from the supports that are, to some degree, made available to traditional-age students\(^\text{17}\). As I perceived there to be few places constructed to serve adults in the way that many high school students encounter guidance and other programmatic supports, I wanted to know how adults navigated their way to school. Other than lots of billboard displays and plastered messages on public transportation, how else were adults being courted or otherwise encouraged or influenced to enroll in postsecondary education? More importantly, what resources did adults use in their decision making? And lastly, why were individuals selecting the for-profit vs. not-for-profit institutions given the negative framing of for-profit education? In close, I provide my concluding thoughts of this research using abbreviate headings of my research questions.

**Contributing Factors to Adults’ Decisions to Pursue Postsecondary Education at Pyramid**

**Environmental Context**

As described in Chapters 4 through 7, the economic context was a significant contributor to my research participants’ decisions to enroll in school. As discussed within earlier chapters, I entered this research with many assumptions and uncovered various blind spots along the way in taking up this inquiry. One of the most important findings that I continue to ponder over is the environmental conditions that participants made their

\(^{17}\) I am aware of the variability of college and career guidance in K-12 education.
decisions to enter school. Aside from the finding that there was little consistent understanding about the term for-profit education, the economic context was perhaps the most significant secondary finding that continues to resonate with me as this was not at the forefront of my thinking when I took up this research.

The fourth layer of Perna’s model highlights the “social, economic, and policy context” as a potential influence on college choice (p. 119), to which my research provides a very specific manifestation of this layer that had a direct bearing on participants’ decisions to enter the postsecondary marketplace. Not only was the economy poor, but the passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2013 added to the milieu of economic insecurity, as some participants’ cases highlighted a reduction in work hours or outright termination before an employer would have to offer them benefits.

In discussion about my findings with my dissertation advisor, Dr. Campano, I was encouraged to think about the structural rather than the mere personal circumstances I was finding in this research, which helped to provide clarity about the larger systemic forces at play in the educational attainment agenda of the U.S. Although one can chalk up the economic situation in the U.S. in the mid-2000s to the time of my writing this thesis as merely going through a recession, this time period really speaks to a more sinister issue that European scholars and public intellectuals have framed as a state of social precarity. Precarity encompasses more than a mere up and down cycle in the economy, it reflects a range of policies and practices brought on by neoliberal capitalism that structurally changes the way in which society operates (Jorgensen, 2015; Van Horn, 2015). In particular, it guts many rights and privileges workers have enjoyed in the latter
half of the twentieth century, thus creating an environment of fear and insecurity—even amongst those who historically enjoyed security on the basis of being better educated (Jorgensen, 2015; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Van Horn, 2015).

This framing of the economic context in which this study was conducted is cognizant of a diverse range of individuals representing various class levels, citizenship, gender and ethnic groups who may unexpectedly find themselves fighting to stay afloat amid threats of insecurity brought on by the off-shoring of jobs, a preference for contract-based employees, and other employment policies redefining the workplace and individual social communities. Higher education requirements, and in some cases, the demand for individuals to become overcredentialized becomes a condition of this context (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Van Horn, 2015). As I write my dissertation, I am teaching a graduate-level course on adult literacy for American and international master’s degree students. Our iterative conversations about the ramping up of literacy competencies and other forms of knowledge to remain competitive in the contemporary workforce is reflective of Jorgensen’s and others framing of precarity. My students have written and discussed their own participating roles as “precariats” in the new work order (Jorgensen, 2015, p. 3). Simultaneously, I wonder about my own trajectory during these times.

My findings have illuminated an issue that pertains to many Americans—the need to retrain for new occupations almost on a life-long basis, as Van Horn (2013) suggests. For one reason or another, each participant largely felt compelled to enter school as their efforts to secure decent employment without additional training seemed virtually impossible. For many, the move to attend school was a way to get on the radar with
employers, as their many online job applications went unacknowledged by employers. In the process of electing to enter Pyrmaid, participants highlighted a number of important personal and social issues in the backdrop of this situation that affected the whole of their decision making. The issue of ageism, perceived time left in the workforce, racism, academic under-preparedness, and a simple lack of resources (e.g., time and money) were some of the major concerns revealed in their stories.

**The Heterogeneity of Adulthood**

One of the realizations that I had in this research was that the notion of adulthood should not looked upon as a homogenous stage. Where one is in their lifespan matters in educational decision making in a myriad of ways, as my participants revealed in the storying of their experiences. A contribution of this research is attention to this fact, yet it is only a beginning understanding. Age alone does not dictate people’s choice; rather, I believe the intersection of age with other factors influences educational decision making. For one, I believe that an individual’s economic stability might be one such factor.

Discrimination with regard to age was communicated as a concern, as was the length of time one might have left in the workforce to make use of the acquired education. Clearly, these are concerns about the return on investment that earlier scholars have cited about tradition age students’ educational decision making (Perna, 2006). I later thought about how loan debt might also become an issue of consideration for others. Additionally, consideration about the length of an educational program becomes salient the older a prospective student might be, simply because of the time needed to build a career in some areas. Further, there are some jobs (e.g., some government positions) that
have age requirements that would automatically render older adults as “unqualified.” In sum, the decision-making of a 28 year old may very well be different from that of a 50 year old.

**Knowledge of for-profit**

At the outset of this research I presupposed that the for-profit moniker would actually mean something to participants of this study. What I discovered, however, was that the nomenclature of “for-profit” education is rather contentious and interpreted in various ways. Hence, the reputation of for-profit institutions did not factor into participants’ decision-making as I assumed it would. Only one person (Mack) appeared to really understand what I meant in my use of the term “for-profit” education. Perhaps, had the other students been aware of the reputation of for-profit schools, they might have made other choices. However, that is not a guarantee. In the aftermath of Pyramid Career School’s closing Gervais, Don, and Whilomena each signed up with another for-profit institution. Don and Gervais both graduated, and Whilomena informed me that she is still “in progress” with completing a medical assistant program at a new school. In the case of Don, however, his decision was likely a factor of avoiding the scenario of having to start over again. As I discovered through this research various interpretations of what “for-profit education” encompassed, it seems this language may be an ill-suited descriptor to define these schools going forward.

**Delivery Model of Education/Training**

Pyramid’s programs were short-term and promoted as getting people trained to assume entry level positions within a year. The participants of this study were struggling
economically and wanted the shortest route to getting new and stable employment. Participants communicated frustration with having to take seemingly unnecessary arts and humanities courses at the community college that they perceived had little value in actually preparing them for the occupations they sought to enter. Although scholars often underscore how much more expensive it is to attend a for-profit institution (Cellini, 2012; Tierney, 2013), participants in this study revealed that they were willing to pay for the experience that best fit their needs and desires even if it cost more. My research participants wanted customer service, and for someone to connect the dots on their behalf in getting to the finish line. Pyramid portrayed itself as offering this type of streamlined, failure-proof delivery of education, which Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2003) highlight as greatly helpful to those who are less familiar with postsecondary education.

In addition to the time-to-completion factor, community colleges, which all students were aware of, were perceived to be alienating environments either because they were experienced before as being impersonal and less supportive of students (Bailey et al., 2001; Revelle, 1997; Vital-Howard, 2006), or students’ academic identities made them feel unconfident or frustrated about doing “college.” Heaven and Gervais’s cases offer a good glimpse of such dispositions. Vivian, Whilomena and Mack also asserted one of these stances. Curiously, Don, who had once worked at the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) as a security guard early in his career, said that he had forgotten all about CCP.
Cost of Attendance and Financial Aid

Although the cost of attending Pyramid was higher than other institutions, participants generally had no issue with paying more for the experience they wanted, as illustrated in the case chapters of Don, Gervais, and Heaven. This is consistent with what other scholars have noted (e.g., Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Iloh & Tierney, 2014; Marecki, 1985; Revelle, 1997; Vital-Howard, 2006). More importantly, it appears that Pyramid was savvy in packaging the expense in a way that was palatable to students. Often, participants spoke about just having to make a small $80/month payment in order to enroll in school. Such a seemingly small upfront financial commitment made Pyramid accessible, although it was costlier than the community college. After reading through Heaven’s financial aid and admissions paperwork, it became clearer to me that the $80.00 pertained to a private loan that was in addition to government-sponsored student loans students might have taken out to cover the full cost of their programs. As Don articulated, students could also defer payment of the $80.00 monthly payment, if necessary.

One challenge that arose in my discussion with others of the issue of cost was whether students were misled as to the true cost of their programs of study. In my review of the interview transcripts, I have not found evidence suggesting that participants did not know the cost of their programs. Tamara, who worked in corporate America for decades and possessed a bachelor’s degree, discussed frustration with her immature peers not taking full advantage of this “costly” opportunity to learn. She also discussed making a sizable out-of-pocket payment toward her school costs. The excerpt of Mack and me discussing his understanding of for-profit education suggests that he was very clear about
the costs of education and likely scrutinized his paperwork. Vivian, as well as her children, had experience with postsecondary education already, as did Whilomena, hence they did not appear unaware of the cost. In my review of Heaven’s paperwork, the costs of the program appeared clearly spelled out. There was actually a handwritten notation on her financial aid award notification, indicating what she would have to repay in loans.

The issue of cost of attendance at for-profit institutions remains a contentious topic among scholars, policy makers, and the general public (Cellini, 2012; Deil-Amen, 2014; Iloh & Tierney, 2014), and rightfully so as students can leave school with high debt, potentially without qualifying for a job that will permit them to pay for their educational costs. Anecdotally, I have found some people have run the risk of depleting their financial aid before actually completing their program of study. In Marecki’s (1985) dissertation research, he made an observation that students may see the sticker price as actually less because of grants, which do not have to be repaid. I find support of this perception in Don’s assessment of only having to pay “half the cost” once his financial aid was applied. I did not have an opportunity to review his financial aid award package, as in the case of Heaven, but seems likely that he would have been eligible for maximum awards of grant support (e.g., Pell, PHEAA).

As all students had experience with postsecondary education already, so they were not completely oblivious to the cost factor. However, this is not to suggest that they had complete and accurate information about education costs across various institutions. For instance, Heaven stated that she never investigated the cost of attending the community college’s medical billing and coding program because she first and foremost
felt uncomfortable in that space, which immediately eliminated it from her “choice set” (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). My assessment is that participants were willing to pay for the experience they wanted. Pyramid’s programs fit their objectives in that it offered short-term career training, potential access to employers through externship, the promise of lots of guidance and support throughout their program of study, and the cost of attendance was made seemingly affordable through delayed payment with very little immediate out-of-pocket requirements. Also important was the notion that Pyramid’s programs would be void of “unnecessary” academic coursework, as the school as usual piece was a perceived hurdle for some.

In thinking about the perceived affordability of Pyramid’s programs, I liken it to that of what retailers such as Fingerhut and QVC do to sell items to budget-conscious consumers. Although a person may not be able to purchase a $1,600 Apple computer outright, QVC and Fingerhut can immediately put such an item within reach of consumers if they devise a payment plan that seems reasonable to a person’s budget. Often, consumers will not benefit from discounted pricing opportunities that are afforded to consumers who have the credit or cash to buy such items outright. Nonetheless, the cash-strapped consumer will have access to what they want. This analogy raises a whole other host of issue regarding the unbalanced scales between the haves and the have-nots, and the academically prepared and underprepared.

The issue of cost is a real impediment to students of all ages wanting to attend postsecondary education. In addition to reading what scholars have noted about this issue, I have had many conversations with students in other spaces who express frustration with
being able to afford school. Something as small as a $250 commitment deposit can bar a person from enrolling in postsecondary education, and even the requirement of having to submit immunization records and physical exams prior to enrollment can become a barrier. The fact that there were little to no upfront costs truly made this educational option seem accessible.

**Limited Informational Resources**

Participants reported having few supports to guide their decision making about school. They reported relying on Internet searches, the advice of admissions representatives, and their own observations of the world to inform their decision making. Generally, participants said that they knew of no formal programs, per se, or outlets that they could access for help with their plans to enroll in school. In several cases, participants expressed the need to keep their plans secret out of fear of naysayers. It is a shame that participants felt that they did not have access to information and resources to support their decision making. This finding highlights a glaring omission in our current policies and practices toward increasing the educational attainment of US citizens, and must be addressed in a way that is inclusive of sub-baccalaureate programs of study as bachelor’s degree attainment may be an unrealistic goal for every person, as my research highlights. Postsecondary education is a complex terrain to navigate, and a thinking partner, as well as advice about using various resources, is needed by adults as my research highlights and Van Horn (2013; 2015) similarly advocates.

Use of the Internet played an important role in most students’ career and institutional search process. Only one or two students said they used any of the resources
I presented to them in the web-based Qualtrics survey (see Appendix B). Mainly, students stated that they did not know about formal resources to which they could investigate their options, which is why the Internet was their primary go-to resource. The Occupational Handbook Guide, however, seemed to be one common resource that a few students were familiar with. Participants such as Gervais and Tamara specifically spoke to finding information online to which they used in evaluating what they heard and saw at Pyramid before they enrolled there. Coincidentally, Tamara and Gervais had the most experience with postsecondary education and appeared to employ more strategies in routing out their options. Nonetheless, both expressed feeling unconfident about their postsecondary choice process.

**Admissions Representatives**

Because participants cited having limited knowledge about postsecondary decision making, or even access to such information, they appeared to rely heavily on what admissions personnel had to say. All students discussed the welcoming and caring approach they experienced when they interacted with Pyramid representatives during their search process and subsequent campus visit. Admissions representatives were noted as attentive listeners, who actively responded to their desires and concerns. Furthermore, the admissions and enrollment process was described as uncomplicated and straightforward. Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum’s (2003) research highlights the value of such an approach used in the occupational colleges examined in their research, for the world of postsecondary education is often an alien environment for most first-generation college goers. Hence a caring and assistive approach that minimizes hurdles is desirable.
In a later publication, however, Campbell and Deil-Amen (2012) highlight serious issues with regard to the predatory nature of some for-profit admissions staff, who employ psychological tactics to recruit students to their institutions. Given the dire circumstances many of my participants were in, I can see the potential of such a practice occurring.

**Process**

The idea to enroll in school in adulthood for the participants of this research emanated from a critical incident that occurred in their lives as a factor of unemployment, poor health, or a combination of both. Without this factor, it seems unlikely that any of them would have sought to enroll in school. If I were to retrofit my findings into Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model, this would constitute a factor of predisposition. Entering school was largely a last resort when other options did not work out and was perceived by 6 of the 7 people interviewed as a necessity\(^\text{18}\). The U.S. and world economy also served as an important backdrop to their personal circumstances, as describe earlier. Under other eras, they might have more easily found employment without having to enroll in school.

In general, participants engaged in a series of phases defined as a period of thinking about potential career areas and what they thought they might enjoy doing; assessing themselves academically or their tolerance for school; exploring schools and evaluating program options; and evaluating job prospects. Most often participants did this on their own, and at most shared it with one other person. The driving force of their

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\(^{18}\) Although Whilomena’s situation is likely perceived by most people as constituting a necessity to upgrade her skills, she did not couch her situation as such. Therefore, I maintained her framing as this was something she just wanted to do.
choosing was to find the most expedient program, which often shaped their choice set from the start. The community college really was never even a consideration to the participants of this study. They expressly sought out a “career” or “trade” school. The great question scholars always ask is, “Why?” when community college costs so much less. I cannot say that it was for a lack of knowledge of the community college. Five of the seven had experience with community colleges already (e.g., Gervais, Heaven, Vivian, Mack, Tamara). I surmised that the notion of “college” did not sit well with Whilomena’s identity, although she enthusiastically supported one of her children in this direction. Don also overlooked this option despite his once having worked in that setting.

In this study, adults also tended to evaluate schools one by one, rather than doing mass applications, as is somewhat common with many traditional age students. Participants also highlighted the importance of their encounters with admissions representative in helping them make the decision to enroll at the school. Also important was the responsiveness schools had to participants’ inquiries when they contacted them via phone for information. Good customer service was very important to these participants vetting of schools. It is surprising that they reported some schools could not get this right, which made Pyramid Career School a standout. The participants of this study disliked having to provide their contact information in the online forms, for the calls never stopped afterwards. They went to see schools in person, if possible, to evaluate its potential for their needs. Pyramid actually encouraged this immediately, which took some participants by surprise.
From what participants described, Pyramid had an effective recruitment plan, in which excellent customer service was demonstrated immediately upon the first contact (Vital-Howard, 2006). They urged students to come in immediately to look at the school and review their program options. Once the student expressed interest, Pyramid staff moved the process along quickly by having them submit an official application and then making an appointment with a financial aid representative. In essence, Pyramid was very facilitative in the enrollment process. Although none of the individuals I interviewed reported feeling pressured to sign up for Pyramid’s programs, participants in this study clearly arrived at the school in a vulnerable state, making them especially open to being potentially preyed upon as Campbell and Deil-Amen (2012) highlighted in their report.

Despite the potential of underlying motives on the part of Pyramid as a for-profit organization, I found in the course of interviewing the seven adults in this study that agency was indeed part of their educational decision making experience. These were inventive and resourceful people, who took action to find a solution to their problems all the while managing a number of personal limitation. Students’ decisions were not necessarily meant to be a thumbing of the nose at traditional higher education. The fact of the matter was that people’s decisions to enroll at Pyramid Career School were largely based on circumstances. Participants needed to re-enter the workforce as quickly as possible. Therefore, the short-term programs available at this institution met their needs. Further, most students cited having a less than favorable relationship with school as youngsters; therefore, the notion of completing an academic program of study was not
something they were interested in. In essence, their decision to enroll at Pyramid Career School was very much a pragmatic one.

**Limitations of Research**

This study was conducted with only seven participants, and therefore, makes no claims to be representative of the universe of adult students attending for-profit institutions at the less-than-2-year level. Further, as my findings highlight, the *time period* in which this research was conducted also make my findings especially particular. Examining a greater number of participants could potentially lead to different findings and conclusions, or conversely, strengthen what I have found. Notable, however, is that some of my findings also correspond to earlier research conducted on the experiences of adults in the context of degree-granting proprietary institutions (e.g., Revelle, 1997; Ross-Jones, 2006).

Second, the site at which I found participants is its own unique setting amongst many other variations of for-profit education within the Philadelphia region and across the United States. As Kinser (2006b) and Chung (2009) note, for-profit postsecondary education encompasses a very heterogeneous population of schools that vary in their quality, offerings, demographic make-up, and management structure. Hence I make no claims regarding the generalizability of my findings to other locations (Creswell, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Pyramid Career School is one of the many *non-degree granting* for-profit institutions that make up a significant share of the for-profit spectrum (Kinser, 2006b; U.S. Department of Education NCES Table 317.30, 2014). This body of institutions is also one of the most under-researched areas of the for-profit spectrum.
In the write-up of this report, I tried to describe my research in enough detail so that others could evaluate for themselves the applicability of my findings to other contexts.

Third, the methodology used in this study relied on participants’ memories of their experience. As such, there may be other important aspects of their journeys to Pyramid Career School that were unreported. An ethnographic account of their experiences—although virtually impossible to conduct—would be ideal in exploring postsecondary choice behavior. I attempted, however, to mediate the effects of memory by repeated interviews, follow-up calls for information, and by using a survey to stimulate participants’ thinking about the resources that informed their choice process.

**Implications and Recommendations for Policy, Future Research, and Practice**

**Expanding Postsecondary Education Guidance to Adults**

To my surprise, many people did not know anything about for-profit education despite the onslaught of negative publicity this sector has been receiving (Stevens & Kirst, 2015). From a standpoint of consumer protection, people should be shown how to vet their options along with using their own sensibilities about what is a good choice for them. Given the complexities inherent in sorting through postsecondary education options (Van Horn, 2013), my research underscores that more resources must be dedicated to assisting adults with their decision-making about careers and postsecondary education. It is well noted that people will have to acquire some type of postsecondary education in order to be viable in the contemporary workplace (Carnevale et al., 2013; Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010; Van Horn, 2013, 2015). Even those who already have
acquired postsecondary education find themselves needing to update their knowledge and skills in order to transition in what has become a very dynamic economy. Many adults, however, simply do not have the knowledge needed to navigate our complex postsecondary education system, and nor are they able to determine how educational programs may or may not be relevant to the shifting economy (Van Horn, 2013). They are also uncertain about and afraid of how to pay for this learning (Perna, Walsh, & Fester, 2010; Van Horn, 2015).

As my research suggests, relying on the Internet and admissions representatives (whether or not they are for-profit or not-for-profit) is risky business. Currently, there are few guidance outlets available to serve adults particularly, which is very problematic as Van Horn (2013, 2015) asserts and my research demonstrates. In Philadelphia, Terri White, Higher Education Advisor for the Mayor’s Office of Education, affirmed that most of the outreach efforts for postsecondary education were still largely targeted to traditional age students (personal communication 3/23/15), as did Julani Ghana, director of the College Access Center of Delaware County (personal communication, 3/11/14). Those that do serve adults specifically are sometimes targeted to narrow audiences (e.g., Veterans, city workers, bachelor’s degree seekers). Others with perceivably more open access (e.g., Equal Opportunity Centers) seem not so well publicized. Regardless, these resources do not appear to be plentiful enough to serve the numbers of individuals needing such services given the demographic profile of the Philadelphia metropolitan area. As I thought about ways of providing support to people such as my research participants, several ideas came to mind, which I discuss below.
As a former college access program director, I envision a space being made for such support to occur in the parent component of programs. As Perna, Walsh, and Fester (2010) highlight, there are challenges to parents’ uptaking of these invitations; nonetheless, providing such a service is important as it offers an opportunity for meaningful relationship building with families if approached with sensitivity, respect, and awareness of how parents and guardians might feel alienated with regard to education and educated people. And given the current economic context, as my participants described, parents and guardians might be ripe now for buy-in. The conversation, however, cannot just be about obtaining a bachelor’s degree, as that is an unrealistic goal for many adults due to a myriad of circumstances, which my research reveals. Instead, a discussion about a full range of possibilities available to individuals should be promoted, as well as where they might get support with improving their literacy.

The Free Library system in Philadelphia (and elsewhere) is also positioned to be a valuable space in which workshops and programs about navigating careers and postsecondary education might be offered to adults\(^{19}\). The main branch located at 19\(^{th}\) and Vine Streets, in particular, already has an area dedicated to career and education resources. Providing workshops about these resources; making sure that available resources are up to date; and providing some instruction on how to find, use, and interpret information would be a great service to many. The library system could also serve as space in which to advertise services geared toward adult learners.

\(^{19}\) Both Don and Whilomena spoke of using the library.
As I interviewed adults at Pyramid Career School, I noted that many participants had a church affiliation that could potentially be leveraged in cultivating knowledge about postsecondary education. As it can be difficult to facilitate educational outreach to the adult community, churches present a unique and seemingly trustworthy route to disseminating information and awareness about postsecondary education. Churches are known to offer various ministries, to which I believe an education ministry would be a welcomed component in uplifting the lives of members, and in an intergenerational way.

Although we often look upon the government to provide services to our communities, I believe there is great potential in ordinary citizens themselves to get involved with helping their neighbors in navigating career and postsecondary education. Many people have experiences and expertise worthy of sharing—even if it is their own story of mishap or “I would do it this way now that I know.” I do a lot of this informally, as many people do. Over the years, I have had many interesting conversations with other women at the hair salon, at which we exchange a wealth of information about a variety of things. Drawing from that experience, I propose that pulling people together in community-based forums at churches, coffee shops, community and recreation centers, etc., could be a powerful and beneficial grassroots way for all of us to become more civically engaged and part of the solution to overcoming the economic instability that many adults find themselves in.

As I was rethinking my strategy for conducting this research, I momentarily toyed with the idea of starting a Meet-Up group for adults interested in enrolling in

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20 Meet-up has a policy against using the site for research purposes. Hence, I let this idea go.
postsecondary education. To my surprise, there were virtually no groups established to discuss postsecondary education in the Philadelphia region. Again, this might be a way for ordinary citizens with experience traversing career changes and educational credentialing to be of support to members of their communities. Given that participants were prone to using the Internet in their educational decision making, this seems fitting.

**More Research on Adult Postsecondary Choice**

The factor of age has been an unexplored aspect of traditional college choice scholarship. Having storied accounts of people’s lives to work with as data helped to illuminate how adults attending a less-than-two-year for-profit institution arrive at their decision making. However, additional research in this area would be helpful to strengthen and potentially extend my findings, as well as highlight the experiences of adults in other social or educational contexts. I remind readers that this study takes place in a very particular environmental (i.e., social and economic) context.

As I was conducting this research, it became evident that future research on college access, college choice, and completion must turn toward the lives of adults who are finding it necessary to return to school because of the changed economy (CAEL, 2011, Van Horn, 2013). As Van Horn (2013, 2015), Carnevale et al. (2013) and other scholars highlight, the twenty-first century has brought new skill and educational demands upon the lives of workers towards the middle and end of their working lives. Given the harsh social, cultural, and economic realities that precarity manifests, many adults must remake themselves—and possibly repeatedly over a lifetime—which is quite difficult (Van Horn, 2013). An examination of how adults in different contexts (e.g.,
community colleges, online programs, special satellite campus programs, four-year for-profit institutions) make these transitions into postsecondary is needed from a multitude of disciplinary contexts so that their unique needs can be better served through policy and practice.

**Customer Service in Postsecondary Education**

The issue of customer service was a notable theme throughout my interviews with participants, and the way in which they spoke of education was indicative of the growing commodification of postsecondary education. In various scholars’ (e.g., Bailey et al., 2001; Vital-Howard, 2006) attempts to understand what makes for-profit an attractive option despite potentially less expensive and more esteemed educational institutions, notably students highlight the importance of personal attention in their engagements with institutional representatives. Thus postsecondary institutions interested in better serving (and attracting) contemporary students should examine and then refine their processes and practices to be more service oriented where needed.

**Reconsider the Languaging of “For-Profit” Education**

This research reveals my own taken-for-granted assumptions about people’s awareness of a body controversial institutions. Yet, more importantly, it illuminates the way in which individuals perceive not-for-profit institutions to be similarly entrepreneurial as for-profit institutions. This suggests that this wording is no longer a useful way to differentiate these institutional types. Research in other communities about people’s understanding of what “for-profit education” means to them appears warranted. Perhaps the results of this research could inform better ways to communicate about this
segment of postsecondary education. This issue also speaks to the need for more inclusive conversations about all institutional options available to consumers. In the college for all movement, a narrow focus appears to have precluded conversations about the possible range of postsecondary options, which students eventually discover on their own, yet without much information to support their decision making.

**Educational Diversity**

Participants of this research underscore the fact “college for all” (i.e., four-year degrees) may not be a realistic goal of policy or practice. Hence, a diversity of options should be promoted to suit the needs and desires of differently situated people as four-year academic routes are unrealistic for “everyone.” Participants of this study revealed constraints that were somewhat beyond their control (e.g., academic under-preparedness, challenges with learning, limited familial support), which limited this goal. Further, changes in the economy, as revealed in this study, may dictate the need for the retraining of older people, even if they have prior postsecondary education. Department of Labor data suggests that the majority of anticipated job openings will not require a bachelor’s degree, however a sub-baccalaureate credential may be advantageous in some fields. With President Obama’s urging of Americans to acquire some postsecondary education, along with the stories of the people featured in this dissertation, a strong market for short-term career and occupational education seems apparent. In the case of for-profit institutions, it represents an opportunity for them to shine in actually serving this need. Their performance in this era could potentially redeem their reputation, if taken seriously.
**Closing Thoughts**

The rich diversity of postsecondary education institutions that we have in the United States speaks to our democratic values, and is something to really be celebrated. People are different and should be able to exercise their liberty educationally, as some of my participants articulated. Some participants’ choices were constrained, however, which shines a light on inequities in learning that still persist in U.S. society. Nonetheless, the ideological divide of vocational vs. academic education is actually harmful to our broader goals as a nation and really do little more than provide a justification for the status quo (Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010; Rose, 2005).

Although the nation’s community colleges are viable places to acquire valuable credentials useful in today’s workforce, they remain inhospitable or alienating spaces to many learners as my qualitative study uncovered. A string of research produced by Rosenbaum and associates (e.g., Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum (2003); Deil-Amen & DeLuca (2010); Person, Rosenbaum, & Deil-Amen, 2006), as well as other scholars (e.g., Bailey, et al., 2001), have illuminated important ways in which quality for-profit institutions operate in effectively serving the education needs of learners who are less informed about doing postsecondary education. And although beyond the scope of my actual research questions, I found myself in awe at how participants spoke so positively about their identities as learners being transformed at Pyramid Career School. There is something noteworthy about this phenomenon, and it suggests that we have so much more to learn about for-profit education as a viable choice before making any hasty and uninformed decisions about their true value in our greater educational landscape.
(Tierney, 2013). More than anything, accountability measures such as those highlighted by Howard-Vital (2006) and Shinoda (2013) should be vigorously pursued to improve this sector and safeguard students electing this route—in essence, excise the bad from the good.

Indeed, the for-profit sector has many serious ethical issues to improve upon. And despite my belief that for-profit education is not inherently a bad thing, the harm that can come to people through what I perceive as criminal deceitful practices is real. The participants of this study who were caught in the middle of their school closing took this hard. For some who were just about done with their studies at Pyramid, their training time was significantly extended, which was very frustrating as program completion time was a very important choice factor to them. Even amid this occurring, however, participants’ stories made it quite apparent to me that a choice of options is definitely a good thing and that a one-size-fits-all approach is inappropriate for the diversity of learners that exist.

The issue of age in this study illuminated a whole other set of questions about what makes sense for older adults in terms of their educational pursuits. Would it make sense for a 50 year old to pursue a bachelor’s degree or even an associate’s degree? Will ageism prevent older workers from acquiring the most lucrative jobs? Will older adults be able to pay for that education over the course of their remaining work lives? What are the economic ramifications on their retirement? Amid the movement to require adults to retrain, these kinds of questions and many others need to be explored in depth so that
public policy and services on the ground can be aligned to support such individuals’ participation in postsecondary education and the new economy.

Many 50- and 60-year old still have to work, yet nothing about the world as they knew is the same. Forty-somethings are similarly caught in this tide of change of having to remake themselves in mid-life. Hence, it is not enough to just tell people that they must go back to school without acknowledging a host of issues, such as earlier educational failure that might impede their ability to make these transitions. What I uncovered in this study was that some participants were actively trying to overcome negative, or otherwise, inadequate encounters with learning from their youth that made them anxious about having to venture in this direction again. Of course, there is something to be said of how this manifests in the first place in K-12 education. As outlined in the case study chapters and Chapter 7, learner identity is an important component of one’s occupational pursuits and school choice. In an age where educational failure continues to be a trend in Philadelphia, I am saddened about the prospects for multiple generations of city dwellers caught in this situation.

My research, in essence, took me on a 360 degree journey in that I found my final thoughts centered on the importance of maintaining, improving, and growing the many college access programs in service today. It is imperative that youth learn about the vast array of options in postsecondary education and subsequently plan thoughtfully about their futures. While I do not believe in making young people go to school (as depicted in Gervais’s case), it is necessary to show them where and how to critically use the information and resources available to vet their options for when they do become ready.
And, lastly, we really ought to begin making postsecondary access support available to all individuals, no matter what age they are.
Epilogue

As various readers responded to drafts of this thesis, people often wondered about the trajectory of case study participants, and some were curious as why I did not discuss the closing of Pyramid Career School in greater detail. I have chosen to provide a rationale for these two questions as an epilogue for future readers who might have similar wonderings. Readers should understand that neither of these elements were the actual focus of this research, which was designed to examine the why and how of adults’ decision making to attend a marginalized institutional type (i.e., for-profit education) to pursue a sub-baccalaureate academic credential (certificate/diploma) against the backdrop of the college for all movement, which privileges four-year degree attainment at a non-profit institution as an end goal for everyone. In large part, I actually view my dissertation as being about how people respond to social discourses on education.

The focus of “college” or postsecondary choice research is about individuals’ pathways to a postsecondary institution or some other option (e.g., work, military) (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 213). Hence this thesis represents my fidelity to this emphasis and to the original design of my study, which was to provide voice and a nuanced understanding of individuals under-represented in existing scholarship. Pyramid’s closing adds to the seductiveness of turning this research into an evaluation of the institution and for-profit education, generally, because the field is so controversial. I believe, however, that a proper evaluation of the school would actually require a longitudinal examination of participants’ lives in the aftermath, and arguably more data than what I collected about the institution.
The closure of Pyramid was an unfortunate and unexpected occurrence. When the school announced its intent to close, my interviewing of participants already had been completed. However, upon learning about the imminent closure of the school, I contacted all study participants with information about what to do in the event of a school closure, which I found on Pennsylvania’s Department of Education website. Of the seven participants interviewed for this research, four were directly impacted by the school closure: Heaven, Don, Gervais, and Mack. Whilomena, Tamara, and Vivian had already graduated.

In the aftermath of Pyramid’s closure, Don did a “teach out” at another local for-profit institution. Subsequently, he graduated at the end of January 2015. According to federal regulation, a teach out is a formal agreement between a closing institution and another institution offering the student’s program of study, which provides for the fair treatment of students in completing their programs of study (U.S. Department of Education Student Aid website, n.d.). Such arrangements eliminate students having to retake courses and attempts to minimize any further costs to the student. Don reported that he had to take a few additional classes at the new school; however, he did not have to pay anything additional. In regard to time, his graduation was postponed by approximately three months. Don expressed feeling satisfied with this arrangement as he did not have to start over again, which he stated many other students did. I do not know if he located a job in healthcare following the completion of his program.

Gervais, who expressed deep anger about his timeline being thrown off, pursued the option of having his loans from Pyramid cancelled. He subsequently enrolled in
massage therapy program at another for-profit institution that was farther from his home, stating that he wished he had expanded his focus the first time around. According to Gervais, he felt the new school was a step up from Pyramid’s in that the environment was more professional (e.g., exceptionally clean and somewhat clinical in feel, the faculty instructors were more polished, and the students more serious/mature). He graduated in May 2015 with a job offer and was awaiting the receipt of his license. Similar to Don, Heaven accepted a “teach out” at a two-year, not-for-profit, degree-granting institution. She was able to concurrently complete the medical billing and coding program there, while also enrolling in an associate’s degree program. Heaven anticipated graduating in either fall 2015 or spring 2016. Mack also transferred to the same institution; however, he withdrew due to ongoing health issues.
APPENDIX A

Before Recruitment Letter

March 3, 2014

My name is Adrianne Flack, and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania. In March 2014, I am launching my dissertation study on how adults (defined as age 25 years and older) make decisions about pursuing post-secondary education and training. In particular, I am interested in learning about the experiences of people who elect to pursue career and technical training programs at institutions that grant only diplomas, certifications, and/or associate’s degrees. I am especially interested in students electing private, for-profit institutions (e.g., Lincoln Technical Institute, Prism Career Institute, All-State Career School). The purpose of the study is to develop an understanding of the literacy practices adults use in their decision-making process.

Participants of the study will be asked to engage in two 45-60 minute interviews with me about their life and educational experiences leading up to their decision to return to school and to discuss their interpretation of various social and media messages about post-secondary education. Participants will be paid $15 in their choice of cash* or a Wawa gift card, upon the conclusion of each of the two interviews. I will also ask participants to be available for follow up questions afterward; however, this time commitment should require no more than an additional hour of their time.

For more information about the study, please contact Adrianne Flack at (cell) or via e-mail at aflack@sge.upenn.edu. This study is being conducted as the final component of my degree requirements, and will be supervised by my dissertation chairperson and advisor, H. Gerald Campano, Ph.D.

In sum, possible candidates for the study must minimally meet the following criteria:

1. Be 25 years of age or older
2. Be in the midst of exploring or have recently enrolled within last 12 months in a postsecondary training or education program that does not lead to a credential above an associate’s degree (e.g., certificate/certification, diploma)
3. Have attended within the last 12 months, are about to enroll in, or are currently attending a for-profit/proprietary school. For example:
   Lincoln Technical Institute All-State Career School
   Thompson Institute DeVry University
   Kaplan Career Institute Prism Career Institute
   PennCo Tech Art Institute of Philadelphia
4. Live in the Philadelphia region (includes Delaware County, Bucks County, Chester County, Montgomery County, and Southern New Jersey)

Thank you for your support!

*For security purposes, “cash” payments related to above interviews will be in the form of a U.S. Postal
Research Participants Needed

Have you or someone you know attended one of the following schools?

Lincoln Technical Institute
ITT Technical Institute
All-State Career School
Kaplan Career Institute
University of Phoenix

DeVry University,
CHI Institute
PennCo Tech
Star Career Academy,
The Art Institute of Phila

Did you or they do so after the age of 24?

Why? I am conducting research for my dissertation (the final step of earning my doctorate degree) about adults’ experiences of returning to school and what factors inform their decision making. I need to find people to interview for my study.

When/Where? Individual interviews will take place at participants’ convenience between the months of March 2014 and July 2014.

What’s the Time Commitment?
  • two 45-60 minute interviews
  • Approximately one hour additional time to respond to follow-up questions and to comment on research results.

Compensation: Participants will be paid $15 (cash* or Wawa gift card—your choice) for each of the two interviews.

Note: *For security purposes, “cash” payments mailed to phone/Skype interviewees will be in the form of a U.S. Postal Service money order. In-person interviews will be paid in actual cash.

For additional info contact Adrianne at aflack@gse.upenn.edu
After/Revised Recruitment Letter & Advertisement

March 18, 2014

My name is Adrianne Flack, and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania. I am conducting a dissertation study on how adults (defined as age 25 years and older) make decisions about pursuing postsecondary education and training. In particular, I am interested in learning about the experiences of people who elect to pursue career and technical education programs that lead to a diploma, certificate/certification, or associate’s degree. The purpose of the study is to develop an understanding of the literacy practices adults use in their decision-making process, and generally, to learn of their perceptions of postsecondary education.

Participants of the study will be asked to engage in two 45-60 minute interviews with me about their life and educational experiences leading up to their decision to return to school and to discuss their interpretation of various social and media messages about postsecondary education. Participants will be paid $15 in their choice of cash* or a Wawa gift card, upon the conclusion of each of the two interviews. I will also ask participants to be available for follow up questions afterward; however, this time commitment should require no more than an additional hour of their time.

For more information about the study, please contact Adrianne Flack at (cell) or via e-mail at aflack@gse.upenn.edu. This study is being conducted as the final component of my degree requirements, and will be supervised by my dissertation chairperson and advisor, H. Gerald Campano, Ph.D.

In sum, possible candidates for the study must minimally meet the following criteria:

1. Be 25 years of age or older

2. Be in the midst of exploring or have recently enrolled, within the last 12 months, in a postsecondary career or technical education program that leads to a credential of either a certificate, diploma, or associate’s degree

3. Live in the Philadelphia region (includes Delaware County, Bucks County, Chester County, Montgomery County, and Southern New Jersey)

Thank you for your support!

*For security purposes, “cash” payments mailed to phone/Skype interviewees will be in done in the form of a U.S. Postal Service money order. In-person interviews will be paid in actual cash.
Interview Participants Wanted

If you decided to return to school for a certificate, diploma or associate’s degree after the age of 24, your help is needed!

A research study is being conducted through the University of Pennsylvania about the experiences of adults who decide to further their education by attending career and technical education programs leading to a diploma, certificate or associate’s degree.

Participants will be asked to participate in two 45-60 minute interviews about their educational background, their process in figuring out which educational direction to take, and their general views about postsecondary education. Participants will be paid in their choice of $15 cash* or a $15 Viva gift card for their participation in each of the two interviews. For more information, contact Adrienne at aflack@pse.upenn.edu or via e-mail at aflack@pse.upenn.edu.

*For security purposes, “cash” payments mailed to phone/Skype interviewees will be in the form of a U.S. Postal Service money order. In-person interviews will be paid in actual cash.
APPENDIX B

Qualtrics Survey

This is a follow-up survey to the interviews you participated in regarding adults' experiences with going back to school. It would greatly help me if you could take a few minutes to answer this brief survey. I promise it's brief:-) Adrianne

Default Question Block

Did you access the Department of Labor’s Occupational Outlook Handbook Guide? You can view the site at http://www.bls.gov/oco/

- Yes
- No

Did you use the U.S. Department of Education’s Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs? You can view this site at http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/

- Yes
- No

Did you read the information your school provided about gainful employment statistics regarding past graduates’ success in entering the workforce following graduation? Note: Some institutions refer to this as Program Disclosures.

- Yes
- No

Did you consult the Federal Trade Commission’s website Choosing a Vocational School? You can view the site at http://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0241-choosing-vocational-school

- Yes
- No

Were you able to talk to a current or former student of your school as you were making your decision to enroll there?

- Yes, I talked with a current student about his/her experience at the school.
- Yes, I talked with a former student about his/her experience at the school.
- No, I did not talk with a current or past student about his/her experience at my school.
Other than admissions representatives at your school, did you talk to someone else about your school options? Check all that apply. In the next screen, you will have an opportunity to write in a response that falls outside of the list of options below, if needed.

- Counselors at PA CareerLink offices
- Staff at a Veterans Upward Bound Program
- Staff at PhillyGoes2College located at the Philadelphia Mayor's Office
- Counselors at the Graduate! Philly office
- Advisors at Educational Opportunity Centers (EOC)
- Volunteers at church-affiliated educational ministries
- Volunteers at a local literacy council office

If you talked with someone other than the list of people identified in question 7, please write in your answer. You do not have to give the actual name of the person, but it would help to identify their role or the agency they worked with. For example, "my cousin" or the "Delaware County College Access Center."

Please write in any other resources you remember using as you tried to make a decision about where to enroll in school.

If you have any comments to add regarding your responses to the questions above, feel free to use the space below to share them. Many thanks!
APPENDIX C

Transcription Symbols based on Gail Jefferson’s Notational Conventions for Transcribing Talk

Below is a selected list of symbols and their meaning that were used in transcribing my interviews.

(0.8)(.) Numbers in parentheses indicate intervals without speech in tenths of a second; a dot in parentheses marks an interval of less than (0.2).

becaus- A hyphen indicates an abrupt cut-off or self-interruption of the sound in progress indicated by the preceding letter(s) (the example here represents a self-interrupted “because”).

::: Colons indicate a lengthening of the sound just preceding them, proportional to the number of colons.

>talk< Right and left carats (or “more than” and “less than” symbols) indicate that the talk between them was speeded up or “compressed” relative to surrounding talk.

= Upper case marks especially loud sounds relative to the WORD surrounding talk.

Equal signs (ordinarily at the end of one line and the start of an ensuing line attributed to a different speaker) indicate a “latched” relationship -- no silence at all between them. If the two lines are attributed to the same speaker and are separated by talk by another, the = marks a single, through-produced utterance by the speaker separated as a transcription convenience to display overlapping talk by another. A single equal sign in the middle of a line indicates no break in an ongoing spate of talk, where one might otherwise expect it, e.g., after a completed sentence.

I did not adhere to Jefferson’s rules for punctuation (http://www.asanet.org/journals/spg/transcriptions.cfm), whereas she describe the question mark, period, and comma as ways to represent intonation in talk. Instead I described the intonation in words surrounded by parentheses. E.g., (he said softly). Punctuation in my transcripts serve their usual grammatical role, except for the colon.
APPENDIX D

Semi-Structured Individual Interview Protocol

I used the following list of “main questions” to help guide my conversation with participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 134-135). However, it was often unnecessary for me to ask every question because participants often provided lengthy answers to a single prompt that covered a lot of territory. For instance, I was able to learn about some participants’ perceptions of the significance of higher education by the way in which they discussed the desires they had for their children’s future. Typically, I responded to participants’ long responses with follow-up questions to clarify the meaning of their responses or to further explore an element of their experience that they mentioned (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 137-140).

1. Please describe the circumstances that led you to return to school.
2. Please tell me about your process of selecting a school and educational program.
3. What specific resources (e.g., people, programs) did you access and use in your decision-making process?
4. Who did you talk to as you were making your decision to enroll in school?
5. How did you decide upon your program of study?
6. Aside from this school (Pyramid), what other institutions did you investigate/consider?
7. What made Pyramid the best choice for you and why?
8. How much does your program of study cost? Did you compare costs with other schools?
9. Did you consider the community college at all? Why or why not?
10. What criteria did you use in your decision-making process of selecting a school?
11. What messages about postsecondary education do you recall hearing as you were growing up—from your parents, school officials, or others in your community?
12. What kind of work did your parents do? What kind of work do your siblings do?
13. Did anyone in your family attend college?
14. What did you want to do when you completed high school?
15. How would you describe yourself as a student in the past? What about now?
16. Did you enroll in college or another postsecondary institution immediately following high school graduation? Why or why not?
17. What kind of work did you do prior to enrolling at Pyramid Career School?
18. There appears to be a push in our society for everyone to earn a four-year degree. What is your perspective on this mission?
19. What kinds of resources do you think should be available to adults wanting to continue their education?
20. What are your thoughts about being a student again at this time of your life?
21. How would you describe how Pyramid Career School differs from other types of schools (i.e., community colleges, four-year schools)? Are you familiar with the term for-profit education?
22. Please describe the admissions process at Pyramid Career School.
APPENDIX E

Career and Technical Education Tables for 2011-2012
(From the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics)

Table P130. Percentage distribution of credential-seeking undergraduates within each credential goal and curriculum area, by sex and age: 2011–12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Credential goal and curriculum area</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Average age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All credential-seeking undergraduates</td>
<td>22,288,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>56.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subbaccalaureate credential</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational education</td>
<td>11,596,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>58.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic education</td>
<td>8,449,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>59.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undeclared</td>
<td>2,291,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>55.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational education</td>
<td>1,747,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>65.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic education</td>
<td>77,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>65.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undeclared</td>
<td>27,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>48.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate's degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational education</td>
<td>6,701,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>58.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic education</td>
<td>2,842,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>55.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undeclared</td>
<td>201,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>50.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bachelor's degree

|                                      |                    |       |      |       |          |      |      |      |        |
|                                      | 10,691,000         | 100.0 | 45.0 | 55.0 | 100.0 | 79.7 | 12.4 | 11.9 | 24.6 |

1 Interpret with caution. The coefficient of variation for this estimate is between 30 and 50.  
NOTE: Data include the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Increases in the number or proportion of students with occupational and academic majors from 2008 to 2012, and decreases in undeclared majors may be caused in part by a methodological change. In 2012, but not in 2008, students with an undeclared major were asked their intended major; those with an intended major were coded as having a major field of study rather than as undeclared. SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2011–12 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:12).
Table P132. Percentage distribution of credential seeking undergraduates within each credential goal and curriculum area, by race/ethnicity: 2011–12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Credential goal and curriculum area</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian/Pacific Islander</th>
<th>Other¹</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All credential seeking undergraduates</td>
<td>22,208,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subbaccalaureate credential</td>
<td>11,596,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational education</td>
<td>8,449,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic education</td>
<td>2,919,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undeclared</td>
<td>229,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate</td>
<td>1,651,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational education</td>
<td>1,747,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic education</td>
<td>77,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>51.1</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undeclared</td>
<td>27,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>74.7</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
<td>9,745,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
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<td>6,701,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>4.3</td>
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<td>100.0</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>20.1</td>
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<td>4.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Undeclared</td>
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<td>50.2</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>29.7</td>
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<td>6.7</td>
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<tr>
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<td>61.6</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Interpret with caution. The coefficient of variation for this estimate is between 30 and 50.

¹ Other races includes American Indian, Alaska Native, those of two or more races, and those of other (unspecified) race. Race categories exclude those of Hispanic origin.

NOTE: Data include the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Increases in the number or proportion of students with occupational and academic majors from 2008 to 2012, and decreases in undeclared majors, may be caused in part by a methodological change. In 2012, but not in 2008, students with an undeclared major were asked their intended major; those with an intended major were coded as having a major field of study rather than as undeclared.
Table P134. Percentage distribution of credential-seeking undergraduates within each credential goal and curriculum area, by family income quartiles: 2011–12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Credential goal and curriculum area</th>
<th>Family income¹</th>
<th>Lowest family income quartile</th>
<th>Second family income quartile</th>
<th>Third family income quartile</th>
<th>Highest family income quartile</th>
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<tr>
<td>All credential-seeking undergraduates</td>
<td>22,280,000</td>
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<td>25.3</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>24.8</td>
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<td>Subbaccalaureate credential</td>
<td>11,596,000</td>
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<td>28.5</td>
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<td>Academic education</td>
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<td>26.9</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>24.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Undeclared</td>
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<td>28.4</td>
<td>25.7</td>
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<td>27.6</td>
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<tr>
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<td>100.0</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>100.0</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>29.9</td>
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<td>25.0</td>
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<td>12,691,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
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</table>

¹ Interpret with caution. The coefficient of variation for this estimate is between 30 and 90.

¹ Parents’ income is used if student is independent and student’s own income is used if student is independent. Income quartiles were constructed separately for each dependency status.

NOTE: Data include the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding; increases in the number or proportion of students with occupational and academic majors from 2008 to 2012, and decreases in undeclared majors, may be caused in part by a methodological change. In 2012, but not in 2008, students with an undeclared major were asked their intended major; those with an intended major were coded as having a major field of study rather than as undeclared.

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