BREAKING THE TRADEOFF BETWEEN SCHOOL AND WORK: COMMUNITY COLLEGE

VOICES ON NAVIGATING WORK AND SCHOOL ROLES

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Dedication

“There's really no such thing as the ‘voiceless.’ There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.”
— Arundhati Roy

I dedicate this dissertation to the 59 young adults who participated in this research journey. May your voices now ring louder and impact academic practice and ultimately the college outcomes for all like you, today and always.
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ABSTRACT

BREAKING THE TRADEOFF BETWEEN SCHOOL AND WORK: COMMUNITY COLLEGE VOICES ON NAVIGATING WORK AND SCHOOL ROLES

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As an increasing number of students engage in part-time or full-time work while attending school, this research aims to better understand the worker lens of low-income, first-generation, full-time community college students. Managing completion pressures and expectations for community college students requires a rethinking and understanding of who the working student is and how to combine a high respect for work with strong academic motivation. Through the process of narrative inquiry, this research study highlighted the voices of 59 community college students who sought to integrate both work and school in their lives given that both fulfilled unique roles and aspirations; and through their stories confirmed that work does not serve as a distraction but rather supports a central identity and role for low-income young adults. Students who valued school and work equally prided themselves on their work ethic, irrespective of type of work and their contribution to their families. School was also valued and was the link to long-term career goals, with students relying heavily on their learning community for support. Community colleges that seek workforce partners and/or greater curriculum alignment are needed to capture the interest and encourage persistence and completion of low-income, first-generation students who manifest a worker lens.
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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND, PURPOSE, AND OVERVIEW OF STUDY

In President Obama’s address to the Joint Congress in 2009, he stated, “The United States cannot lead in the 21st century unless we have the best educated and most competitive workforce in the world” (Obama, 2009). He then pushed the country to take on an attainment agenda that would lead to America having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 (Obama, 2009). The 2020 attainment goal complements the research about increasing the “upskilling” of current jobs in the United States and the prediction that 63% of the jobs in 2018 will require education beyond high school (Finney & Perna, 2014). To reach the president’s proposed attainment goal and meet the demands for higher-credentialed jobs, the United States would require 8.2 million more degrees than the current higher educational system is producing (Jones, 2014). An estimated 5,000 of the new degrees will need to be earned at the community college level, where we are witnessing increasing enrollments and low rates of attainment (Jones, 2014).

One hopeful community college student is Ivy Chavez. Chavez is a young Latina in Miami who just graduated high school. Chavez, a first-generation college student, knew she was going to choose Miami Dade College, Wolfson Campus, to begin her journey. Chavez planned to work while she attended school for four reasons. First, she did not want to take on college debt. Second, she did not want to add to her parents’ financial burden. Third, she wanted to contribute to her household, and fourth, she wanted to feel a sense of independence. In an interview for a workforce development
program on campus, Chavez said, “School is key, but it is also a form of work that you have to pay for” (Chavez, 2012). Chavez views school and work as intertwined; she expressed the need to do both and not trade one for the other.

Chavez is among the 79% of all community college students who work (Levin, Montero-Hernandez, & Cerven, 2011). Not all community college students will work for the same reasons as Chavez; however, understanding the working student is important for postsecondary institutions and education policymakers given that work has “both benefits and costs to a student’s educational experiences and outcomes” (Perna, 2010, p. 251). Working full-time is a “risk factor” known to reduce the likelihood of persisting to degree completion (Levin et al., 2011; Sullivan, 2005, p. 127), and 41% of community college students work full-time (Levin et al., 2011, p. 65). However, working while enrolled is also associated with benefits such as “greater engagement in effective educational practices and higher future earnings” (McCormick, John V. Moore II, & Kuh, 2011, p. 252). Understanding the way work may affect educational outcomes is important to research so that students like Chavez can embrace their intertwined roles of worker and student and achieve their postsecondary credentials.

Statement of the Problem

Community colleges face enormous pressure to increase student persistence and completion in order to meet federal and state attainment goals. At the same time, community colleges provide access to postsecondary education for many minority, low-income, and first-generation adults (AACC, 2015b). Groups that are increasingly being served by community colleges have low, and relatively stagnant, rates of attainment
compared to those who attend four-year colleges (Jones, 2014). Thirty-nine percent of
students at community colleges who intended to pursue bachelor’s degrees leave school
without completing a degree or certificate program (NCES, 2008). Responding to
increased attainment pressures requires an understanding and engagement of diverse
students in college through removing barriers (Harper & Quaye, 2009). One area
requiring increased understanding and attention is that of the working student. Work is a
central characteristic of community college students and yet “research is scarce on the
understanding and theorizing about students who work and attend community colleges”
(Levin et al., 2011, p. 74).

Nationally, 79% of all community college students work and, among those who
work, compared to those who attend four-year institutions, 50% are more likely to do so
full-time (Levin et al., 2011). Students work for myriad reasons: to meet unmet financial
need in education due to increasing college costs and limited federal financial aid and
scholarship opportunities (Lenaghan & Sengupta, 2007); family expectations (Tuttle,
McKinney, & Rago, 2005); the academic, social, and career advantages (Cheng &
Alcantara, 2004); and because work serves as a core part of students’ identity,
particularly for older students (Perna, 2010).

Working often has been viewed by academia as a distraction from the academic
mission and focus of the student. However, studies demonstrate that retention rates vary
based on the number of hours worked by students. Retention rates are higher for students
in two-year and four-year colleges who work one to 15 hours per week than for students
who do not work at all (Pusser, 2011). For community college students in particular,
working part-time (defined as between two and 35 hours per week) does not seem to have the same detrimental effects on persistence as full-time work. (Levin et al., 2011).

The idea that work has an enrichment benefit for students is supported by the work of George Kuh, who reported that 32% of 149 seniors interviewed considered work instrumental to their leadership development and personal growth (Kuh, 1995). Interviews with working students in a complementary study revealed that work “helped shape their academic interests and career choices” and that “work did not affect their academic performance in a negative way” (Cheng & Alcántara, 2007, p. 306). Last, for a subset of students, working may contribute to honing organizational skills and work habits that make study time more efficient and effective (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Feldman, 2005).

Depending on the number of hours worked, a positive link to student engagement exists. However, to fully understand the link between work and student engagement, one must understand that the type of work matters. Working on- or off-campus has been linked to several dimensions of student engagement, and for those who worked more than 20 hours per week on campus, even greater benefits were noted (McCormick et al., 2011). Students who work on campus and students who work less than 20 hours per week off campus more frequently interact with faculty off campus than nonworking students do (Umbach, Padgett, & Pascarella, 2010). Also, work on campus shows a significant positive relationship with five benchmarks of educational practices: academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environments (McCormick et al., 2011).
More research is needed to understand the impact of work on students and persistence across different racial and ethnic groups. Some research notes that all kinds of work are associated with lower persistence for African Americans and Asian Americans in community colleges (Levin et al., 2011). However, in a study of African American four-year college students, campus employment solidified a stronger link to the college’s resources and benefits and demonstrated higher engagement with regard to academic experiences (Flowers, 2011). The link between on-campus and student engagement for African Americans may be attributed to having greater opportunities to learn about and access the college’s resources as well as finding personal champions who support persistence. A smaller percentage of Asian American students worked compared to other racial ethnic groups (Perna, Cooper, & Li, 2007). In addition, Asian American students worked fewer hours than other racial and ethnic groups (Perna et al., 2007). Latino students also are more likely than other racial or ethnic groups to work part-time or full-time to help pay for college (Santiago, 2011).

More research is also necessary to understand the impact of work on students from various socioeconomic backgrounds. First-generation students work more hours than non-first-generation students (55% versus 41%) and are more likely to commute to college and work than non-first-generation students (71% versus 39%) (McCormick et al., 2011). Working as a student is less common among dependent undergraduates with family incomes of $100,000 or more (Perna et al., 2007). However, the share of independent undergraduates from the lowest incomes working is smaller than students of higher incomes (Perna et al., 2007).
Working students are shaped by cultural capital that is reflective of an individual’s social class (Titus, 2011). Cultural capital includes non-economic resources that enable social mobility (Bourdieu, 1984). Examples of cultural capital include knowledge, skills, and education. Social class is reflected and perpetuated via the use of social capital. Social capital, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 249). Bourdieu attributed social capital to the elites and saw its use as a way to hold onto power and advantage (Bourdieu, 1984). Titus’s research on working students suggested that “college students’ access to labor market information, a form of social capital, differs by class. These class differences may shape how individuals enhance their human capital while enrolled in college” (Titus, 2011, p. 248). Many low-income, first-generation students do not have access to social capital that can link their work experiences to meaningful career-driven work experiences.

Postsecondary institutions have a role in creating social capital for low-income working students and brokering social networks for young adults who do not have access to career-driven opportunities. Social capital is reflected in isolated social networks by race and ethnicity that further hinder meaningful employment opportunities for African American and Hispanic young adults (Sum et al., 2014). Thus, low-income African American and Hispanic young adults seeking career-driven opportunities need to seek social networks outside their socioeconomic cluster or enclave (McDonald, Lin, & Ao, 2009; O'Regan & Quigley, 1996). Postsecondary institutions that have a better
understanding of the working student can find effective ways to increase working students’ link to career-driven work, thus impacting engagement and ultimately student persistence.

The complex relationship among student demographics, student work, and academic outcomes has been highlighted above. There are college models and effective practices that support a student’s working on- or off-campus. For on-campus work, high-impact models require that the postsecondary institution administrators see themselves as hosting learning environments rather than workplaces; see themselves as teachers, not as managers just getting the work done; and begin with determining specific learning outcomes for the working students who are valued within the particular unit (Lewis, 2011). Off-campus strategies that support the working student at community colleges include integrating curricula that works with high schools to create an easy transition to community college; creating work-based learning experiences supported by local businesses and industry; ensuring up-to-date, industry-relevant standards; creating career-focused courses; and linking to college preparation in the high schools to support students’ successful transfer to college (Orr, 1999).

Although there are effective models that support working students, they represent isolated bright spots, particularly in the community college sector. Community colleges need to go further in exploring what education means outside the classroom, look at the quality of on-campus paid work, and push for meaningful internships for low-income students (Levin et al., 2011). Such efforts can support the majority of community college students’ efforts to achieve both their workforce and educational goals.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to amplify and make visible narratives of low-income young adults in community college who work while enrolled. The students selected for the study are in the Year Up program, which works in partnership with community colleges and allows students to pursue higher education full-time while working full-time in their second semester at a career-driven internship for which students receive full-time college credits. Year Up is one of several workforce models that support students who seek to work and attend school full-time.

The primary research question guiding this study is, how do low-income community college students understand and accommodate school and work in their lives? Understanding students’ conceptualization of work and school and how such conceptions were formed will also be part of this study.

Significance of the Study

Students today manage many roles, including that of employee. For many working students, postsecondary institutions, and policymakers, work needs to be re-conceptualized as an experience that promotes student educational outcomes (Perna, 2010). In order to achieve a greater link between student employment and positive student educational outcomes, the voice of the student must be heard by, and considered relevant to, postsecondary administrators and educational policymakers who design and fund programs and services to foster student access and success. Levin, Hernandez, and Cerven—in their chapter “Community College Students and Work”—state: “Practices and policy, at the state level and at the institutional level, can gain from attention to
research and knowledge about students’ conditions, specifically their lives as workers who are students or as students who work” (Levin et al., 2011).

A study of community college students in the Year Up program will provide a national organization, which has yet to participate in a fully qualitative study, with impactful data. Year Up has engaged in numerous studies, most notably “A Promising Start: Year Up’s Initial Impacts on Low-Income Young Adults’ Careers,” which focused on the impact of wages for participants who became employed (Elliott & Roder, 2011). This study will represent the first qualitative study in Year Up’s 12-year history that is focused on its community college partner sites in Phoenix, Miami, and Baltimore. This study is meant to contribute to the postsecondary literature that is invested in maximizing the advantages of work and minimizing its disadvantages so that working community college students can achieve a credential that supports their economic and social mobility (Perna, 2010).
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter provides an overview of the existing published literature regarding working community college students. Following is a review of studies highlighting issues related to why work matters to low-income, first-generation community college students, why students work, and the impact of work on student outcomes. Also included is research on social capital and the impact on student employment choices and opportunities. Research on strategies that support working students and the impact of college and work models is also included.

Why Work Matters for Low-Income Community College Students

Community colleges face enormous pressure to increase student persistence and completion while also managing demographic changes in the student pipeline. “Groups with high rates of educational attainment are shrinking as a proportion of the United States population, while the proportions of those groups with low rates and relatively stagnant attainment are increasing” (Williams Zumeta, 2012). For example, the number of White high school graduates is down from a peak of 2.8 million in 1975 to 1.7 million in 2013, whereas non-White high school graduates surged from 500,000 in 1963 to 1.3 million in 2013 (The Pell Institute, 2014). There has been an increase in Hispanic and African American community college enrollment rates, with Hispanic enrollment rates surging faster than the national growth rate and closing the enrollment gap between Hispanics and Whites (The Pell Institute, 2014). According to the Digest of Education
Statistics, Latino community college enrollment trends show an increase of 246% and an increase of 103% for African Americans from 1990 to 2013 (NCES, 2014).

Although there has been impressive movement during the 40 years of data collection on Hispanic and African American college enrollment, college degree attainment is a different story. The college completion rate in six years at a four-year public university for Hispanics is 48%, 38.5% for African Americans, 59.2% for Whites, and 66.3% for Asian Americans. The majority of Hispanic students have been choosing to attend community colleges where graduation rates are worse (College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, 2012). All enrollment growth will happen at public open-access institutions (the states’ regional comprehensive universities and community colleges) and will be subject to emerging demographic changes (Jones, 2014).

African Americans and Hispanics are more likely to attend community college and open-access schools even though they may have the same test scores as Whites who are attending competitive four-year colleges, which supports a role of reinforcing racial privilege (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). There are numerous factors that cause Hispanic and African American students to enroll at community college. First-generation Hispanic college students are more likely to consider financial issues and proximity to home as prime factors in their decisions of where to attend college (Núñez & Bowers, 2011). With 51.7% of community college students needing at least one remedial course, it is clear that preparedness remains a driver of college choice (America, 2012; Jones, 2014).
Why Students Work

The research points to many reasons why students work. First, students work to pay for college (Tuttle et al., 2005). More specifically, students work to provide for unmet financial need when receiving some portion of financial aid in Federal Work Study and when the student or family cannot, or will not, pay the cost of attendance (Lenaghan & Sengupta, 2007; Perna et al., 2007). Average tuition rose by more than 8% in 2012 and now tops $5,000 a year, a record high according to a 2012 report from the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO, 2012). With average tuition rising steadily for decades, student working rates (as a result of paying for unmet financial need) are not expected to decrease (Tuttle et al., 2005). Students also work because families expect them to work, as noted by National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data in 2005 revealing that 63% of dependent students’ parents expected them to work (Tuttle et al., 2005). Work offers academic, social, and career advantages that include post-college employment opportunities in addition to confidence and independence in exercising choice as a result of earning a wage (Cheng & Alcántara, 2007). Last, work—in particular, for older students—is key to identity and often drives an individual student’s choice of college programming (Perna, 2010).

The Impact of Work on Student Outcomes

Employment among college students is increasing, particularly among community college students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2007 45% of traditional-aged undergraduates (18- to 24 years) worked while enrolled, as did 80% of part-time students (Perna, 2010). If you include students over 18 years of age, 79% of
students work while in community college as compared to 70% of those enrolled in four-year colleges (Levin et al., 2011). Some scholars have argued that working students can be viewed as part of the American tradition. In a 1937 study of Columbia University students, 65% of undergraduate and graduate students worked (Tuttle et al., 2005). Today’s students differ from the 1937 study in that there is more racial, ethnic, class, and regional diversity than in 1937 and also differences in reasons why they work.

Student working rates have been linked to notions of persistence and student engagement but not to academic outcomes (Pascarella et al., 2005; Perna et al., 2007). Community colleges have higher rates of students who work full-time, which is considered a risk factor that reduces likelihood of persistence to degree completion (Phillipe & Gonzalez Sullivan, 2005). What is also known, but not fully understood, is that there are lower retention rates for students in both four- and two-year colleges who do not work at all than for those who work between one and 15 hours per week, with declines in retention for students who work 16 to 20 hours per week (Pusser, 2011). These data may suggest that working even a few hours enables organization of schoolwork that may be lacking without working. Working part-time—defined as between two and 35 hours per week—does not seem to have the same detrimental effects as full-time work on persistence of community college students. For community college students who work part-time, 59.12% persist as opposed to 53.6% for those who did not work at all (Levin et al., 2011).

Types of work matter in understanding any relationship of impact to student engagement outcomes as defined by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE),
which include: 1) Level of Academic Challenge (LAC), 2) Active and Collaborative Learning (ACL), 3) Student-Faculty Interaction (SFI), 4) Enriching Educational Experiences (EEE), and 5) Supportive Campus Environments (NSSE, 2010). In a study of four-year college students, working on- or off campus was positively related to several dimensions of student engagement, especially for students working more than 20 hours per week (McCormick et al., 2011). However, contrary to expectation and previous research, some of the stronger effects on positive student engagement were for those who worked more than 20 hours per week on campus (McCormick et al., 2011). Perhaps full-time students and those employed on campus understand how to navigate and make tradeoffs between school and work balance given that they are steeped in the college culture in a way that those employed off-campus are not. However, more research needs to be done on impacts of student engagement and links to on-campus or off-campus work for community college students.

Research on the impact of work on African American students has led to conflicting suggestions. According to one study focused on four-year college students, the amount of time African Americans worked on campus also increased engagement in academic experiences (Flowers, 2011). However, another study on community colleges noted that for African American and Asian American community college students, all kinds of work—whether part- or full-time—are associated with lower persistence rates than not working (Levin et al., 2011). For all other racial and ethnic groups, part-time work is associated with greater persistence than not working (Levin et al., 2011). More
research is needed to understand the impact of work on students and persistence within different racial and ethnic groups.

Residential status—like race, gender, and social class—is also a differentiator in understanding student employment. Seventy-one percent of first-year, full-time students who lived off campus were employed compared to 39% of campus residents (McCormick et al., 2011). When looking at community colleges in California, the largest community college system in the country, 80% of students work and the majority of students are commuters (FCCC, 2014). Given that many Hispanic students seek college options based on proximity to home (Núñez & Bowers, 2011), and Hispanics represent 43% of full-time enrollment at California Community Colleges (FCCC, 2014), understanding working students in community colleges, especially in California, extends lessons for understanding the working Hispanic student population.

With so many students working, understanding the benefits to employment beyond the economic contribution is necessary for colleges to value work within the academic setting. For adolescents, work has been demonstrated to have very positive socialization effects and to help in both the development of character and the enhancement of social skills (Finch, Shanahan, Mortimer, & Ryu, 1991). Scholars who looked at the connections between adolescence, work, and poor academic outcomes demonstrated that any assumed negative academic outcome was preexisting. Research demonstrated that adolescent work has a positive time-allocation effect—the more youth work, the less they watch television (Schoenhals, Tienda, & Schneider, 1998). In a more recent study of college students, Nonis and Hudson sent out 440 surveys to public
university college students in the mid-South to see if there was a direct relationship between time studying or working and academic performance. Only 264 surveys were useful, and results suggested there was no direct relationship between time spent studying or working and academic performance (Nonis & Hudson, 2006). In a study conducted by Pascarella, for a subset of students, working contributed to honing organizational skills and work habits that made study time more efficient and effective (Pascarella et al., 2005). In a Cheng and Alcántara study, students reported that “work helped shape . . . academic interests and career choices” and “work did not affect . . . academic performance in a negative way” (Cheng & Alcántara, 2007, p. 306).

For low-income Hispanic and African American students, research suggests that type and quality of work is important. Having work that is career-driven coupled with higher education yields better job outcomes, which is an embraced goal for completing higher education (Sum et al., 2014). However, data from the Current Population Survey (CPS), the March Current CPS supplements, and the American Community Surveys in 2000 and 2011 revealed that job outcomes varied along racial and ethnic lines. Non-Hispanic Whites, those from higher-income households, those with work experience, and those with higher educational levels had better job outcomes (Sum et al., 2014). The lack of opportunity for young adults to express themselves professionally is limited for African American and Hispanic young adults. So, although we may see more low-income college students working, the quality of work and its link to career opportunity may be weak (Alssid et al., 2005). Creating career-ladder opportunities linked to successful community college engagement strategies is a way to reconceptualize the
community college student experience and better serve low-income, first-generation working students. Rethinking what college means and how it can better serve low-income, first-generation college students would require college leaders to understand the role college has in brokering economic and employment opportunities for low-income working students and brokering social networks for those young adults who do not have access to diverse social networks.

Social Capital: Student Choices and Opportunity

Cultural capital includes non-economic resources that enable social mobility (Bourdieu, 1984). Examples of cultural capital include knowledge, skills, and education. Social class is reflected and perpetuated via the use of social capital. Social capital, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 249). Bourdieu attributed social capital to the elites and saw its use as a way to hold onto power and advantage (Bourdieu, 1984).

In Marvin Titus’s research on working students, “college students’ access to labor market information, a form of social capital, differs by class. These class differences may shape how individuals enhance their human capital while enrolled in college” (Titus, 2011, p. 248). The findings from his research also indicate that students from high-income families realize higher salaries than other students even after controlling for hours worked while in college and college completion after six years (Titus, 2011). Titus’s findings reinforce that class differences “may shape how individuals enhance their human
capital while enrolled in college through networks and information, or in other words, how students use social capital to transform their human capital into financial gains in the labor market” (Titus, 2011, p. 248). Many low-income, first-generation students do not have access to social capital that can link their work experiences to meaningful career-driven work experiences and advance their opportunities.

A contributor to isolated social networks by race and class is housing. Residential segregation perpetuates disadvantage for many African Americans and Hispanics by concentrating neighborhood poverty and severing the link between social and spatial mobility that other racial and ethnic groups historically have used to work themselves up the socioeconomic hierarchy (Massey, 2012). Housing segregation further isolates social networks by race and class and limits the amount of social capital that can be accessed to obtain career-driven employment and educational opportunities. The cluster or enclave motivation of individuals affected by housing segregation prevents opportunities to build more diverse social networks. Many low-income African American and Hispanic young adults seeking career-driven opportunities need to look for social networks outside of the socioeconomic cluster or enclave where they reside (McDonald et al., 2009; O'Regan & Quigley, 1996).

To understand further how social networks work, McDonald studied information access by gender and race as it related to job leads. The study found that White male advantage definitely exists, and as White males moved into higher management positions, the advantage is preserved through exclusive access; White men have the least job leads in the lowest supervisory level but the most in the top supervisory level.
(McDonald et al., 2009). Although employment opportunities were shared among Hispanic women in McDonald’s study, the information was not about career-driven opportunities, only lower-level supervisory roles.

Accessing social capital presents particular challenges for some members of the African American community based on the lack of overlap between where African Americans live and where they work. According to Stoll (2006), “African-Americans appear to be following jobs but at a slower rate than jobs are relocating from African-American neighborhoods.” Stoll speaks to the environmental context many African American and Hispanic young adults in urban centers are navigating when they are trying to access employment.

Social capital and social networks should not be viewed only in a deficit orientation. For example, it is a result of the enclave that many socioeconomic groups and new immigrant groups are able to survive and engage. According to Falcon (1995), the Hispanic community relied on predominately Hispanic social networks to survive, especially the immigrant population. Family, friends, and institution-based networks all play roles in building social capital and accessing new social capital (Domínguez & Watkins, 2003). However, while expanding a network within class limits is achievable, crossing class, race, and education barriers often requires brokers that provide entry to new and different social networks. Education administrators and faculty have had a strong role in brokering educational opportunity, but the question is how that role can be extended to broker opportunity for meaningful work and internships for low-income, first-generation community college students.
**Research on Strategies to Support Working Students**

The research described above surfaces complex relationships among student demographics, student work, and student outcomes. Now, I turn to research about different strategies being implemented to address these issues. With nearly half of full-time students working, there needs to be a reconceptualization of what work means for colleges and how colleges can create strategies that support the working student and foster student success, for those underrepresented in American higher education. Institutions should no longer view the role of student employment as an “unnecessary, unfortunate distraction” from undergraduate studies given the prevalence, intensity, and necessity of employment (McCormick et al., 2011). For colleges—and, in particular, community colleges—moving low-income, disproportionately Hispanic and African American students to completion will require a greater understanding of existing successful strategies and adapting such strategies to highlight and incorporate the needs of working, low-income students.

There are 10 cited high-impact educational practices that increase student engagement: First-Year Seminars and Experiences, Common Intellectual Experiences, Learning Communities, Writing-Intensive Courses, Collaborative Assignments and Projects, Undergraduate Research, Diversity/Global Learning, Service Learning, Community-Based Learning, Internships, and Capstone Courses and Projects (Kuh, 2008). Implementing these practices is a direct way to increase student engagement. Additionally, the value and impact of out-of-class experiences contribute to valued outcomes of college (Kuh, 1995).
Creating and fostering a sense of peer support and learning is a successful strategy for students who have diverse risk factors, and quite often work is viewed by colleges as at odds with this effort. Learning communities as “a formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together, [that] may or may not have a residential component” demonstrate a positive impact on student academic performance, engagement in educational fruitful activities, and gains in attendance and satisfaction with the college experience (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). The limitations of Kuh and Zhao’s research are that it is focused only on four-year colleges (not community colleges) and the amount of time spent in a cohort is not discussed. Learning communities that support working students require flexible scheduling, allowing blocked course schedules to take place in the evening and on weekends. Based on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) across 18 different four-year colleges, student engagement was positively related to academic outcomes and persistence and the effect was greater for “lower ability students and students of color compared to White students” (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008).

Understanding parent engagement for low-income and first-generation students also can lend insights into how to support low-income working students in community colleges. Gofen’s research in Israel looked at first-generation students and sought to understand what made these students break the intergenerational cycle that lacked higher education. Three themes emerged from student interviews: 1) parents’ supportive attitude toward education, 2) understanding by students that parents sacrificed to support their children, and 3) family solidarity and connection to understanding one’s ambition is
linked to family benefit (Gofen, 2009). Gofen’s research looked at family support other than financial support as a key factor for success and linked to research on the persistence among low-income, first-generation students in the New York TRIO program. Through the use of interviews, parent understanding and support (acceptance of college as a positive goal) was key in understanding resiliency and educational persistence for students (Miller & Tatum, 2008). Parent engagement and understanding that parents are an asset are both important in understanding first-generation and low-income student resilience and persistence. Working students may be contributing to a family wage, so engaging families in understanding the value of school and work and tradeoffs is important (Levin et al., 2011).

When researching first-generation, low-income students and persistence, some researchers will acknowledge the role that the college and faculty have in supporting students to learn to balance work and school and also to link work and education to career-driven opportunities. In the National Black Male Achievement Study, 219 Black men from 42 colleges were interviewed and moved to an asset narrative of why Black men were achieving. Fifty-six percent of participants were low income and working class (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012). Of the five findings highlighted, three were related to work and out-of-classroom experiences. Findings included: 1) the importance of college bridge programs to attend top-tier colleges, 2) the need to understand work as necessary and to support the balancing of work and school, 3) facing racism and stereotypes, 4) internships changing the trajectory of career decisions, and 5) out-of-classroom experiences to support academic success (Harper, 2007). Better integrating
external work experiences into the academic goals of college is another successful strategy that incorporates, understands, and meets the needs of working college students.

**Utility of Impact of College and Work Models**

Many community colleges serve as the social network for low-income young adults and become the brokers of meaningful internship and workforce opportunities, thus keeping students who need to work engaged, connected to the school, and focused on college and course completion. However, in order for community colleges to link young adults to workforce opportunities and career pathways effectively, community colleges must reengineer the structure and delivery of education and career training (Alssid et al., 2005). Key changes that a community college should invest in are:

1) creating bridge programs between developmental and credit-bearing programs,
2) developing internal career pathways leading to certification and college degrees,
3) expanding support services, 4) integrating academic and vocational education,
5) integrating administrative structures, and 6) using college resources effectively (Alssid et al., 2005).

Interaction with workforce development organizations, many of which seek to develop or expand partnerships with higher education institutions, can be viewed as a way that low-income, first-generation young adults can expand their social networks and achieve their persistence goals rather than leaving college without a credential or employment experience. However, workforce-development programs that serve young adults vary in quality and employment outcomes. As some critics have stated, youth-workforce developers have been focused on providing opportunities for career
exploration and not on creating a standard by which to evaluate and ensure that positive impacts can be achieved (Brown & Thakur, 2006). Four successful practices in youth-workforce development that complement the above-highlighted six changes community colleges should develop: 1) strong management; 2) a comprehensive approach to working young adults that includes enhanced social supports; 3) building competencies for youth to succeed academically and professionally, as there is a need to weave in both work and education modes of success without valuing one over the other; and 4) creating measurements that can evidence the success that has been achieved with youth (Brown & Thakur, 2006).

Many colleges employ students but have not been deliberate about the benefits and learning that can come from work. As with workforce providers, colleges that employ students can also benefit from implementing what are viewed as strong, sound practices noted in a 2007 study at Northwestern University’s college union. Key understandings for colleges that employ students include: 1) teaching ourselves to see our service areas as learning environments rather than as workplaces, 2) seeing ourselves as teachers, not as managers just getting the work done, and 3) starting with determination of specific learning outcomes that are valued within the particular unit (Lewis, 2011).

Community colleges face many challenges, such as being under-resourced under increased completion pressure and, in many states, under pressure to achieve job outcomes for graduates. Templin, former president of Northern Virginia Community College, suggested an approach to meeting completion and workforce outcomes for community college students that also supports the working student. In short, Templin
stated three points that most community college leaders have heard: 1) increase the transparency of low-income student success, 2) track other key factors that impact student success, and 3) revamp developmental education. Although none of the suggested approaches is easy, having data and using that data to understand who is persisting and who is not should guide a college’s programming efforts. It was through Templin’s data collection that he realized he needed to support working students; thus, he created a dean position so that the increasing number of evening students had a senior administrator who could respond to them in the evening. Templin understood that a well-run community college meets the needs of working students. Creating links to external community partners to achieve connections with high school students and workforce partners has encouraged students to attend NOVA and to realize that they can work and attend school and be successful at both (Templin, 2011).

Templin is among a number of community college leaders seeking to build workforce partnerships that successfully would support low-income working students. Four community colleges, in collaboration with youth workforce development organizations, sought to achieve high occupational skill development and prepare students for future education and gainful employment. The level of cohesiveness of state planning for workforce development and the level of state support for implementation of federal policies at community colleges were similar, although characteristics like location differed among the schools. Each community college model 1) integrated curricula with high schools to create an easy transition to the community college, 2) created work-based learning experiences supported by local businesses and industry, 3) ensured up-to-date
industry-relevant standards, 4) created career-focused courses, and 5) linked to college preparation in the high schools to support students’ successful transfer to college (Orr, 1999). The case studies highlighted by M. T. Orr, demonstrate that community college leaders are willing to work with their local high schools, parents, community businesses, and workforce partners to build effective supports for working young adults while also fostering student success.

Federal policies have a role in promoting and incentivizing college practices and behaviors to better meet the needs of student who work. Various federal policies such as the Tech Prep Education Act of 1990 and 1998, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act of 1998, and the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 encouraged, and in some cases required, collaboration in new workforce-development organizations (Orr, 2001). The postsecondary institution partnerships where college credits and the skills-based courses continue toward a four-year degree in high-growth industries are excellent examples of how a community college can meet the needs of a working student through the focus on a seamless integration of school and work.

This focus also addresses workforce challenges faced by localities. Rampant closings of mostly traditional manufacturing facilities in the last decade have forced cities to find ways to revamp their workforces. A survey conducted by the Bloomington Economic Development Corporation in late 2005 indicated that area life science companies would have 1,500 job openings during the next five years with 60% of those openings representing entry-level positions (Whikehart, 2009). The Indiana Center for
the Life Sciences was created to prepare both current and future workers for careers in the life sciences industry through a partnership with community colleges and four-year colleges. Their mission is to coordinate directly with industry, successfully administer center guidelines, facilitate the interaction and direction of educational and training venues, administer oversight of the center’s resources, maximize successful program completions, and be proactive in response to the voices of the customer, business, and process. The center gave the education, government, and business sectors the opportunity to work collectively toward creating a skilled workforce so that choice of school and work can be complementary and support local economic development.

Another partnering strategy for community colleges to understand the working student and place the work of the student as central to the academic training is demonstrated by Year Up. Year Up is a one-year, intensive training program that provides low-income young adults, ages 18 through 24, with a combination of hands-on skill development, college credits, corporate internships, stipends, and support (Chertavian, 2015). The Year Up program has two forms: 1) a not-for-profit, stand-alone model and 2) a community college–based partnership. The community college partner sites’ participants are full-time community college students, unlike the full-time participants in the stand-alone model. The community college sites take 18- through 24-year-old students—mostly Pell grant recipients—and have them enrolled full-time for their first year while the second semester is a 30-hour-per-week internship earning at least nine college credits. Stipends, soft skill development, and partial cohort-based programming are all elements that make Year Up successful at helping low-income,
mostly first-generation students connect to career-driven opportunities and persist in community college.

Opportunities that are school-based and hands-on can provide vulnerable/low-income students with early exposure to high-demand opportunities such as in the STEM fields and can prepare a pipeline of students to enter into degree or certificate programs that they would not have considered otherwise. The creation of 9th grade through community college schools (9th–14th) is a move in the right direction given that it avoids the high school–college transition where we lose many low-income young adults of color. Both HEROES Academy and P-Tech in New York are located in hyper segregated Hispanic and African American communities and offer a community college degree, recognized paid internships and certification, and associate’s degree in the fifth year. Enrolled Hispanics make up nearly one-quarter of all public school students in the country (Fry & Lopez, 2012) and 22% of community college students in the country (Krogstad & Fry, 2015). Transitions from high school to college risks losing low-income student talent. To link 12th grade to an associate’s degree and/or certification for a demand-driven industry is to mitigate the loss of talent in higher education and the workforce by paying greater attention to the employment and academic needs of young adults (Merisotis, 2014).
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH METHODS

This chapter outlines methods used for exploring how working full-time, low-income, first-generation community college students understand work and school in their lives. First, I introduce a rationale for using qualitative inquiry, then I describe a narrative inquiry approach. I also discuss participant selection, site selection, sampling, recruitment methods, and analysis procedures. The chapter concludes with measures to ensure the quality and validity of collected data, limitations of the research study, and my positionality in the study.

The Qualitative Approach to Inquiry

Qualitative research methods encourage questions of how people make sense of the world, how we understand and interpret context, and how we understand processes (Maxwell, 2012). It is through qualitative research methods that we can understand further the underdeveloped voice, experience, and decision making of working community college students from the students’ own perspectives. Based on a survey of the literature, theorizing about students who work and attend community colleges is limited (Levin et al., 2011). According to Creswell, qualitative research contributes best when “studying people who have not often been studied such as individuals from diverse cultures, socioeconomic levels, racial groups and gender orientations” (Creswell, 2016).

Qualitative research methods can be applied to understand the context in which working students develop their understanding of the roles of school and work. Individual
working student insights, although not generalizable to all students, can be helpful in assessment and program enhancement (Harper, 2007). My research project will attempt to provide legitimacy to the voices of working students in community college and articulate the ways in which they understand work and school in their lives.

**Narrative Inquiry as a Methodological Approach**

As a way to understand the working student, I chose to use narrative inquiry, a methodology of qualitative research that focuses on narrative stories that “tell of individual experiences and shed light on the identities of individuals and how they see themselves” (Creswell, 2012). In qualitative research, researchers are not interested in testing a hypothesis but instead collecting data to build theories, concepts, or themes (Merriam, 2002). Narrative inquiry begins with the experiences expressed in lived and told stories of individuals (Creswell, 2012). A strong collaborative feature of narrative inquiry is the interaction between the researcher and participant via dialogue that stems from interviews, observations, and shared documents (Creswell, 2012). A research project in which students construct their written narrative that can inform semi-structured, in-depth interviews assures that the project is dialectical in nature. Through this research approach, I—as the researcher—was able to have a greater understanding about a student’s past experience in defining values around school and work and how it affected that person’s present situation as a working-class community college student (Dewey, 1986). The methodology of narrative inquiry also supports the notion that “humans are story telling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This view allows me, as the researcher, to see the individuality of
each student narrative while also assessing and understanding the similarities across the student narratives. Last and most important, with narrative inquiry students do not experience being researched—rather, the students are part of the research process (Andrews, 2008).

Interviews and written student narratives were the primary method of collecting data for this research project. I asked participants to write a three- to four-page narrative using one or more of the following questions as prompts:

- How do you think of work and what are the assets you bring to work?
- How do you think of school and what are the assets you bring to school?
- Do the assets you bring to work and school overlap?
- Why does work matter?
- Why does school matter?
- How does your family think of work and school?

I heard from colleagues that students might resist writing; however, even with the tight timeline for interviews, more than 50% of the 58 student participants completed a 750-word narrative. Other students, due to a tight timeline caused by delays in IRB approval, agreed to participate in interviews without the prior written narrative. However, the interviews remained consistent and robust whether the student had a prior written narrative or not.

Participants’ written narratives were not used to judge the student, just to allow personal reflection and documentation of their stories in their voices. During the interview process and the writing of the narratives, students were open and quite
vulnerable in speaking about their lives and how they value and prioritize school and work in their lives. Interviews and writings that allowed and encouraged students to speak of work included very candid discussions of class that students rarely have had the opportunity to discuss. After the interviews and written narratives, students were more reluctant to share their full names in the research but were comfortable keeping their college affiliation, gender, age, race/ethnicity, and immigration status.

**Participant Selection**

To be considered for participation, students had to be 18 to 24, enrolled full-time in one of the three community college partner sites (Baltimore, Miami, and Phoenix), have less than 30 college credits, and be part of the Year Up program. Year Up is a one-year, intensive training program that provides low-income young adults, ages 18 through 24, with a combination of hands-on skill development, college credits, corporate internships, and support (Chertavian, 2015). The Year Up program has a strong cultural identity within the community college setting and attracts first-generation, low-income students of color who seek to build both academic skills and social capital via a six-month internship placement in a career-driven opportunity. Other criteria included receipt of Pell grants or other documentation of low socioeconomic status.

Based on Year Up program demographics historically, I expected to have a slightly male skew, with 60%. Instead, the mix was 53% male and 47% female. In addition, with more than 680,000 Deferred Action Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients nationally and more than 377,000 successful renewals (United We Dream, 2015), I
expected 15 DACA participants but actually engaged 13 students who had DACA or mixed-immigration-status parents.

**Site Selection**

I chose three community college sites, Miami Dade College in Miami, Gateway Community College in Phoenix, and Baltimore City Community College in Baltimore. All three community colleges have a Year Up program on their campus. The choice to include three Year Up sites stems from an intent to incorporate student narratives that represent the diverse social and cultural context for each campus. Phoenix participants’ demographics skewed more toward DACA recipients and heavily Hispanic. Baltimore participants were a bit older and with more African American representation. Miami participants tended more toward first-generation Haitian and Caribbean students.

**Data Sources, Sampling, and Student Demographics**

I collected multiple sources of data, including the Year Up program student demographics and enrollment status. I gathered institutional data on the geographic context and college-wide student profile. I reviewed and analyzed these documents to provide a greater sense of context for the students’ interviews. I recorded notes during student interviews and reflections afterward.

I requested student participant narratives through email and via a Year Up staff announcement. I hosted a video conference or in-person meeting with students to answer any questions regarding the research study. Thirty-four student narratives were collected through my private student email account or in person when I arrived at the community college site. Miami Dade College was the site that had the longest lead time for written
narratives based on IRB approval, and all of the student participants were able to complete a written narrative prior to being interviewed. Half of the Gateway Community College students and Baltimore City Community College students completed a written narrative due to a rushed interview timeline influenced by IRB approvals. However, when I arrived in Baltimore and Phoenix for student interviews, there was overwhelming student interest in participating in the research study.

I also derived data from semi-structured student interviews. I interviewed students who submitted a written narrative or who expressed interest when I reached the community college site and who adhered to the participation guidelines. I interviewed 59 students, 12 from Baltimore City Community College, 33 from Gateway Community College, and 14 from Miami Dade College. Eighty-three percent of students were first-generation, 75% were receiving federal financial aid (Pell grant recipients), 47% were female, 53% were male, and 22% were DACA or had mixed-immigration-status parents. Finally, 32% were African American, 47% were Latino, 10% multi-racial, and 5% White.¹

Students’ interest in participating in the interviews increased at the community college site through peer encouragement and after meeting me in person and asking a few questions about the research study. Although emails, video conferencing, and staff announcements yielded a great group of student participants, the in-person connection was the ultimate recruitment tool that yielded the largest number of students and inspired

¹ See appendices 2 and 3 for summary of demographics.
current participants to recruit more students for the research study. See Table 1 for details on student demographics.

**Interviews and Questions**

All student participants received an email invitation, heard a Year Up staff member announcement, or met me via a video conference to answer questions regarding the research study. A consent form and interview sign-up form were sent to each student via email and then handed out by a Year Up staff member. I recorded student semi-structured interviews and transcribed them using Rev.com. I analyzed and hand-coded each transcribed interview, culling themes across and within the student groups and communities. When quotes were highlighted to support a theme, I performed a member check with each student.

Questions used in the interview included but were not limited to:

- What are the key things that I should understand about how you prioritize school or work at any given time during your college experience?

- How do you communicate the values of your school and work roles to your family, friends, and faculty?

- What would you like me to have asked you about school and work that was not addressed in your narrative?

**Data Analysis**

Fifty-nine interviews took place on the community college campus in a private conference room. Two interviews took place by phone because both students were either working or ill and could not come to the interview when I was on campus. All 59

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2 See appendix 4 for sample email.
3 See appendices 5A and 5B for consent forms.
4 See appendix 6 for interview protocol.
interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed. Students agreed to their school, racial/ethnic, and immigration status being public but not their names. After the interviews were completed, it was clear that a lot of private and emotional material was shared. To respect the vocal minority who sought to have their names removed as expressed in the member-checks process, I have chosen to assign pseudonyms to all the students referenced in this research study.

I read the transcribed interviews and narratives at least three times and hand-coded and categorized them into themes using a color-coding system and notes in margins. I culled six emergent themes from the written narratives and interviews, and I checked themes across sites and within student racial/ethnic groups. The six themes that emerged were the importance of student voice, the value and prioritization of school and work, early work and school memories, intersectionality of identities that impact values of school and work, support for the working student, and future aspirations. Highlighting student narratives by the six themes and then sub-themes allowed me to take readers of the research study on a journey of how student participants understood school and work in their lives and how they framed their values around school and work.

Trustworthiness and Methods of Verification

In qualitative research, validity means that findings are accurate and plausible (Creswell, 2016). There are numerous ways to check validity in qualitative research. For my research study, triangulation—or, rather, “building evidence from different sources to establish themes”—was critical (Creswell, 2016, p. 191). I read multiple times the student written narratives and the student interview transcripts to cull six themes and key
quotes that supported each theme. Then I engaged in what Lincoln and Guba call “the most critical technique for establishing credibility,” member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). I then relied on peer debriefing by select members of my doctoral class and on youth workforce development professionals (not employed at Year Up or colleges that were in the research study) for insight into interview methods/strategies and my preliminary analysis. Peer debriefing offered me the chance to communicate my findings and receive feedback on potential gaps and flaws in my findings. The process of peer debriefing also kept me energized with my research and honest with my findings.

I chose not to use a qualitative software program because I was committed to re-reading the interview transcripts and narratives numerous times and did not want to have a machine/distance between me and the data. I also wanted to move information around easily. Both reasons cited for hand-coding are stated common disadvantages for using computer programs (Creswell, 2012). After each community college visit, I wrote reflections in my journal and highlighted immediate themes I saw. Once the interviews were professionally transcribed and member-checked, I would check my original notes with new notes from the transcripts and also cross-check them with the written narratives. There were several times during the research process where I felt that my personal experience was being mirrored. In those instances, I needed to seek distance, check in with my adviser, and remember that my experience is my truth and not to layer that truth onto the students’ narratives or interviews.
Study Limitations

There isn’t a single research method that is without limitations. Narrative inquiry relies on the collection of stories from individuals’ “lived and told stories,” and those stories may shed light on what “identifies individuals and how they see themselves” (Creswell, 2012). Narrative inquiry is a powerful methodology that allowed the student stories to flourish, yet as a researcher, I needed to be cautious not to “misinterpret and establish causal links” of students’ shared lived experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 6). A student’s lived experience is not generalizable, but that lived experience can have a role in informing practice in education.

The second limitation relates to the selection of participants. Though all participants were community college students, the students selected for the research study were not randomly drawn from the general community college student population. Rather, participants were recruited from the Year Up program located at the community college. Community college students in the study applied to be in the Year Up program and then were selected to participate. This method of selection may limit the ability to draw concrete conclusions or generalize the study findings to a larger group of working community college students. However, the role of the study was a deep exploration of working students with a careful lens in order not to generalize the findings but use the findings to inform practice. By focusing on Year Up participants, the study accessed community college students in three different cities and allowed me to collect data within a two-month time frame.
The third limitation is that Year Up participants are traditional college-age students (under 25) (Juszkiewicz, 2015) and represent at least 40% of all community college students (AACC, 2015a, p. 4). The average age for a community college student is 28 (Juszkiewicz, 2015). Nontraditional students, or adult learners, are the majority of community college students often because of flexibility in scheduling and programming as well as affordability (AACC, 2015a). By focusing on younger-age college students, I was seeking to understand the values of school and work that so often are only understood for the older, more-nontraditional-age college student.

The fourth limitation is that research study participants attend community college full-time, which is representative of 39% of all enrolled community college students (AACC, 2015a, p. 4). Although full-time students are not the majority of community college students, they do represent the students more likely to persist and complete degrees at their community colleges (Juszkiewicz, 2015, p. 5).

**Role of Researcher**

As a former leader and social entrepreneur within the Year Up organization, I have relationships and garnered support for my research from the current chief executive officer, Gerald Chertavian, who provided me with a Year Up point person who answered my data requests that related to Year Up specifically. All other requests went through the particular community college. This is important, given that the Year Up program has never participated in a formal qualitative research process; breaking new ground, I am the first to represent the Year Up student voices in a qualitative research study, which adds value to my dissertation research and to the field. I also have had a strong previous role
with Year Up as the founder of the New York site and the person who launched the Miami site; however, my current research is not associated with students with whom I have worked or had any formal relationship, and I no longer have formal ties with the Year Up organization. Last, I am a first-generation, Latina, working-class student who commuted to college and worked two jobs throughout my college experience. I could not imagine completing higher education while not working. I understood early on that one of my many identities was that of a worker, and it links with my being working-class, Latina, and first-generation.
CHAPTER FOUR

SURVIVING AND DREAMING: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings that emerged from my analysis of students’ written narratives and interviews. The latter expressed how they viewed school and work as well as how they constructed their values and understanding of the tradeoffs between school and work. The intensity and honesty of each interview and narrative proved to be both humbling and enlightening. Students expressed how school and work were central to their understanding of their parents and their immediate social class, and they also described how they expected their education and work experiences to play a role in shaping their futures. It was through listening to and reading these stories that I understood the power of young adults who struggle to attain higher education while also supporting family members and balancing that struggle with deeply moving voices of aspiration, determination, and hope. For these reasons, I refer to the narrative of the young adults that I outline in this chapter as “Surviving and Dreaming.”

I divide this chapter into six parts, based on themes culled from the narratives and interviews. The first theme, *The Power of Voice*, explores why students overwhelmingly agreed to participate in the study. What they contributed helps one understand the need for more student voices in research on education. In addition, because of student interest and engagement in the research study, their participation increased from an expected 50 to 58 students. The second theme, *Why the Tradeoff?*, presents students’ responses concerning the prioritization of school and work in their lives. This theme also explores the perceived and understood values of both school and work. The third theme, *Lessons*
from the Womb, presents the students’ earliest memories of school and work and how such memories shaped and informed their views of tradeoffs between school and work. The fourth theme, My Difference Is . . . , discusses the intersectionality of identity that goes beyond the students’ current school and class affiliations. This theme highlights how these identities play a role in the tradeoffs that students often make when balancing work and school. The fifth theme, Support Means . . . , presents tangible strategies from students about how they currently navigate school and work roles and suggestions for what could help them better balance these roles—an important step to drive future research and policy to aid this population. The final theme, My Turn to . . . , presents students’ future goals and their understanding of the shaping force of school and work in their emerging adulthood.

The Power of Voice

As part of this research study, and serving as a warm-up question for the interviews, I posed the question, “Why did you choose to participate in the study?” The majority of participants, irrespective of community college site, sought participation in the study to have their voices heard and amplified. Students related feeling ignored and silenced when they presented opinions or spoke about school and work. For example, Scarlett, a Latina freshman at Gateway Community College, said, “My professors are not accepting or interested in hearing about why work is a big deal to me. I know to not mention it because they might think I don’t care about school.” Students were unapologetic in their need to have their voices heard and to feel that their stories were being represented in their words. Most students sought to have their voices legitimized—
which means being respected and visible in research and discussion on students’ understanding of school and work roles. For other students, being invited to participate and having control over their quotes created a snowball effect in which students recruited their classmates to participate in the study. For a subset of students in Phoenix, participation offered the opportunity to counteract the negative stereotypes of students with DACA status as unengaged and not prepared for college work. For many students in Baltimore, participation offered the opportunity to counteract the negative stereotypes about low-income African American young adults as uninterested and unengaged.

Elijah, a Latino 21-year-old freshman at Gateway Community College, describes himself as an “average kid with above-average expectations” of himself. In the interview, he immediately focused on putting me, the researcher, at ease by saying, “I know you want to listen and will respect what I have to say. So, thank you.” I did smile and realized that the boundaries for our roles were being set—I as the respectful and nonjudgmental listener and he as storyteller. Like Elijah, many of the young adults reiterated how they understood the boundaries of the interview and cited the need to be heard and listened to without judgment. Elijah’s experience as a participant connected him to many of the other students. “I feel by doing this interview, it gives me a chance to get my voice out,” he said. “For someone that I won’t even know to hear what I have to say is pretty cool. What if I say something and it impacts someone else and keeps going? I want others to know we are connected in struggle and understanding of school and work.”
Hannah, a Latina 19-year-old freshman at Gateway Community College, rarely took a breath in her interview. She was so excited to participate, and from her first statement I immediately understood that participation for her was about amplifying the voice of 665,000 students who have DACA status (Wong et al., 2015, p. 3). Hannah, as was true of many of the students at the Phoenix site, spoke about her frustrations with the nation’s current immigration policy and how it has shaped and informed her notion of school, work, and security. She said:

I want to tell people that are DACA students that they don’t have to limit themselves. That after high school they can go anywhere and it is not just about work—school can be part of your future too. You have to look for programs that want to see you succeed and join them.

Teresa, an African American freshman at Baltimore City Community College, saw her participation as part of a larger political context given that she disagreed with the way Baltimore’s African American youth were being portrayed in the media during the Baltimore unrest in 2015,5 which happened to be in her neighborhood. Teresa started her interview, much like Elijah, by setting boundaries, stating, “This is going to get political but today it is on my terms.” As I listened, I heard a thread of connection among all the Baltimore students, which was that the narrative of young African American women and men is being constructed by others and very much out of the students’ control. Students openly described how the recent unrest left them feeling as if America did not like them or their city. As Teresa said, “Black folks are hated once again.” For those reasons, Teresa chose to participate. She said:

You said our voices were important, and with the Baltimore unrest and all, I felt it was important to give you some type of feedback, to share more of myself that

5 http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/28/us/baltimore-freddie-gray.html?_r=0
might otherwise be ignored or restated in the wrong way. Us young folks in Baltimore are tired of being represented the wrong way.

Throughout the interview, Teresa continued to reference the need for a narrative change and ultimately for affirmation for all the young African American students at her community college who are doing the right thing—demanding change through work and education.

Creating a space to affirm and recognize the powerful role of second chances in young adulthood was another motivating factor to participate in the study. Benjamin, a Latino freshman at Gateway Community College, did not believe his high school self was who he really was or wanted to be. Like many of the students in the research study, high school was something that “happened to them” rather than being driven by them.

Benjamin discussed his high school versus college persona with a constant reference to the fact that, at the community college, he was visible whereas in high school he was invisible and no one seemed to care. He described it this way:

In high school I was the guy in the corner, the quiet guy. It was almost as if high school said “Don’t take advantage of opportunities.” As a college student here in Year Up, I feel the opposite. I want to learn and contribute and be part of something. I work and go to school and I need both and I think that is good for me to share with others.

Benjamin spoke of his high school invisibility at length and shared that he would see how many classes he could miss in high school before the teacher would notice. In one class the teacher stopped taking attendance, and he just showed up on exam days. Now at Gateway, Benjamin is engaged, visible, and learning. He has become the champion student recruiter for the local Year Up program.
In a similar fashion, John, a Latino freshman at Miami Dade College, learned early that he was not to talk about his needs outside the classroom. He once shared with a teacher in high school that he needed to work to help out at home, and she looked at him as if he had a mother who did not understand the importance of school. “I felt judged and angry and then ashamed,” he said. “I wanted to help my mom out and so what if I needed to work and it would make it hard to balance work and school. High school was not a forgiving place.” Although John was a good student in high school, he felt that he was guided to a community college. He remembers meeting with his guidance counselor, who presented all of his college options. However, when he mentioned that he helps with the family housing costs, the discussion seemed to stop in its tracks, and he was told that community college would be a good choice for him. Feeling shut out and silenced because of his need to work, he enrolled at Miami Dade and did not even consider attending a four-year college.

For John, like many of the students participating in the study, the interviews provided an opportunity to be vulnerable in ways they could not be in the academic setting. In college, John found it easier to communicate what was driving his decisions, and in most cases it was the need to work. However, even with work as a pressing priority, John—a self-described organized student—maintains a 3.5 GPA. For John, participating in the study gave him a sense of freedom. “I am participating,” he said, "because I believe it will help the school as a whole if they could really accept that students have to go to work and go to school. Why does school assume it is the only thing that matters?” John ended his interview feeling emotionally exhausted. As he said,
“I have never opened up this much. Sharing the need and stress of school and work is not something I can do at home or at school. Thank you.” John represents many voices in the research study; he wants respect for caring for his work and school, and he also wants affirmation for managing both. In all, he wants to share his struggle and his pride in being a first-generation college student. Despite the challenges, he sees a bright future for himself.

The last driver for motivation was the students’ need to see and connect with a mirror image of themselves. My positionality became central to the trust and engagement for a subset of students. My initial presentation to groups of community college students about the study allowed them to understand the research study but also to feel a connection to me and develop a level of trust that would allow them to speak openly in the interviews. After I presented at each college, several students immediately came forward and were eager to talk because they wanted to know more about what I was doing. More important, they were eager to find out how I arrived at the place I am now. Roadmaps, mirror images, inspiration, and connections are drivers for any student to learn, and for this project, being a Latina provided student participants a level of comfort in addition to fostering engagement. Rose, a multiracial freshman at Gateway Community College, was the first to sign up and meet with me in Phoenix. When she entered the interview room, she had my biographical sketch in her hand and a notebook to take notes; she was planning on asking me questions about college and work. I let her know that the interview was about her. I kept us focused on the interview, but I understood the absolute need to connect and seek mentors and advisers who look like you
and understand your experience. I did make sure to spend time with her after the interview. When asked about participation, Rose stated, “I am participating because I wanted to meet you and see a Latina doctoral student. Maybe one day I too can do what you are doing.” She went on to say, “I became a good student because I was inspired. I keep looking for inspiration—that is what drives me.” Rose was hungry to feel connected to a woman of color, so after our post-interview conversation, she recruited a few more students to participate.

Jose, a Latino freshman at Miami Dade College, was the first in Miami to sign up for an interview. He spoke about how he felt connected to my presentation earlier that month and wanted to be part of something that represented and respected student voices. He also wanted to talk for the first time about his family. He rarely opened up around his peers, but discussing his work meant speaking about his parents and their struggles. “You care about my story,” he told me, “and as a Latina, I think you would understand it more than others so I won’t feel uncomfortable sharing certain things. I don’t want to be judged for my choices—I want to be understood.” Likewise, Abigail, an African American freshman at Baltimore Community College, spoke to a connection she felt when she heard about my background but also about how the researcher and the subject need each other and need to feel that connection. Even when we sat for the interview, she owned the room, and I felt like she was building something with me. She described her transformation this way:

I like inspiring people and I am a talker. I know some of your story and it inspired me. It feels like we both came from a place where folks don’t expect much. My family never really went to college. My mom went but did not stay. I
wished she would have stayed. I am going to stay. I feel like you can make a difference. I need you to make a difference and you need me too.

Abigail’s words served as a motivation for me throughout the study. I believe that the best research occurs when the researcher and the subject understand that each needs the other to make the best possible outcome.

**Why the Tradeoff?**

College administrators and policymakers frequently make assumptions about what students value without asking them directly. The question of how students value school and work was a key driver for this research study. Little is understood about young adults under 25 years of age who manifest a strong work ethic and value school. Slightly more than half (52%) of students view both school and work as equally important and necessary. They reject the idea that school or work has to have a higher priority. I call such students part of the “both/and” camp. Fewer than half of the students in the research study (41%) said that school is a higher priority than work but are actively engaged in working and attending school. Only 7% of students stated that work was a clear priority and had the highest value. These students spoke to needing to alleviate immediate dire circumstances such as finding housing.

*Both/And*

For the slight majority of students in the research study, school and work represented an equal value and prioritization. Jose, the Latino freshman at Miami Dade College, unapologetically talked about how, for him, work meant survival. He had a Maslow-like approach to understanding work. He saw work as the basis for all things and that learning could only come from a place where your survival and security were
assured. He said, “How can you think of school when work allows you to survive, which in turn allows you to learn?” Jose’s family is supportive of education and, in particular, college, but his lessons of survival and building his “hustle” were critical. He talked about the important life lesson of knowing that, if you can take care of yourself, you can go as far as earning a degree. Jose is proud of his “hustle” because it represents his “brand and character.” His placing value on work has not diminished his interest in college. He has a 3.4 GPA and is doing extremely well on his internship this semester. Jose’s work ethic is obvious, and he is clear that survival is his first and foremost concern, but his approach does not obscure or detract from the value of his academic pursuits.

Ella, an Asian freshman from Miami Dade College, came to the United States when she was three from Hong Kong. She was raised by her aunt and reunited with her mother and father when she was going on 12. It was at nine that Ella would accompany her aunt to her restaurant job and help out. Work was important, but her aunt always said that work without school is limiting. Ella said, “Work is no joke, and in this generation you need it to survive. If you can’t value work equally with school, then you will just struggle.” Ella talked about life in general being overwhelming and how school does not teach you how to survive, especially when you need to take care of yourself and your family. According to Ella, the reason that school deserves equal value to work is that school can direct you to a job that is less hard on your body. Ella is balancing and at times feeling the tension of work and school but cannot imagine her life without both.
Isaac, an African American freshman at Miami Dade College, has had his share of different colleges. As he said, “School’s never really worked for me, or rather I never really fit with school.” It wasn’t that Isaac was a poor student; he actually was a strong student when he was motivated. Isaac understood as he got older that he was struggling with bouts of depression, and once he understood more about himself, he felt he was a new person. Isaac is a self-described “worker” who will not let his boss down. He refuses to be late and knows how to manage conflict at work. It was through work that Isaac built his self-esteem and confidence to try college again. Now at Miami Dade, Isaac is a good student and on course to be placed at a strong internship site. Isaac looks at school and work as having equal value. Work represents survival value but also the self-esteem that has allowed him to re-engage with school. He views school as presenting work options that he does not have now as a manager at CVS. Although Isaac is hopeful, he is also skeptical about the value of a college degree. He said:

Does it really take four years to gain knowledge? What about all of those students that paid tuition and dropped out? Today, I get that school is never going to fill all my needs and it is really a credentialing hoop thing.

Isaac is a thinker who is currently rediscovering his academic self and uses his worker self as an emotional and financial safety net. Miami Dade College represents Isaac’s third academic chance. He is aware that few young adults ever get such an opportunity, and for that reason his spirit is contagious because it is filled with optimism for his future.

Layla, a Latina freshman at Miami Dade College, is a single parent and DACA student who knows that work allows her and her daughter to survive. She does not shy away from saying that parenting is the most serious thing she has ever done and has only
intensified her focus on school and work. Even while pregnant at 16, Layla worked and graduated from high school with a full scholarship to attend Miami Dade College. Layla is very proud of her work ethic at jobs and also at school. At the time of the interview, Layla was doing an internship. She was beaming when she said that her supervisor commented that she stands out for her commitment to detail and timeliness. Layla knows that she has to support her daughter and soon her mother too. She loves that she can excel at work and school, and when I asked her where her optimism comes from, she said, “If I have to work to survive, learning to love it makes all the difference.” Layla is also a diligent student. She expressed feeling stressed at times but knows that school links her to opportunities that will allow her daughter and mother to live a better life. Layla is inspiration incarnate.

James, a Latino at Gateway Community College, is the oldest of three boys. After high school James had to go straight to work to help support his family because his father was unemployed for three years. Seeing his mother cry over their situation fueled James’s commitment to work hard at two jobs—one in sales at a technology store and another as a dishwasher and then cook at a restaurant. It was James’s hunger to gain access to a career-driven role in technology that led him to leave Tucson and move to Phoenix with roommates to go to Gateway Community College as part of the Year Up program. James describes himself as an entrepreneur and risk-taker who knows that he will run a business one day. He is obsessed with two iTunes podcasts: 1) The Art of Charm, which focuses on increasing the value of social and professional relationships,

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6 http://theartofcharm.com/podcast/
and 2) Tim Ferriss\(^7\) deconstructs world-class performers from different areas so that you can benefit from their ideas. Both podcasts speak to James’s personality, a hungry entrepreneur who wants to learn and be efficient in his rise to success. James not only moved from Tucson to attend Gateway Community College, he recruited three friends who also realized they did not have to trade work for school. When discussing his equal valuing of school and work, James said, “I consider school my back bone and work my vehicle for where I want to be.” James was also very conscious of and enjoying the fact that he is young, unattached, and without children. Now that his father is employed, his newfound freedom is represented in this quote: “Time is the most precious thing we have and, for me, giving time to both right now in my life is the best choice—so both are equally valued.” James is a passionate and driven self-learner and a determined young man who won’t give up until he reaches his goal of being a successful tech entrepreneur.

Amelia, an African American freshman at Miami Dade College, talked about valuing school and work equally but having distinct benefits from each. For her, what connects school and work is stress. At work, Amelia has learned about time management, positive energy that yields productive work relationships and an immediate sense of where you stand. At school, Amelia feels that she is jumping through hoops half the time, but she feels as if she is learning things that will help her in the future. Being a college graduate does offer something that work does not; as a graduate, she will be a role model in her community and will be working at an office job—different from most of the people in her neighborhood. Regarding her participation in Year Up, Amelia said,

\(^7\) http://fourhourworkweek.com/podcast/
“Year Up is a translator of the values of school and work for me and so when I get stressed in either area, there is a common understanding here that I need both to be the best me.” Amelia is a strong student with a 4.0 GPA who works 25 hours a week. She is highly motivated and says her choice and need to do both work and school has left little room for a social life, but she accepts that she is sacrificing now for a benefit tomorrow.

School as the Priority

Of students in the research study, 41% placed a higher value and priority on school than on work. Many students, like William, an African American freshman at Miami Dade College, spoke to an internalized parental voice that emphasized school as a priority. William’s older brother attended a historically Black college on a full scholarship, and his parents were thrilled. Both his brother’s academic success and his father’s struggle as a cab driver motivated him to keep school as the priority in his life. Although William works close to 30 hours a week, he maintains a good GPA and excels at his technology classes. He is so eager to go on to his internship because, for the first time, he will receive college credit for work and that takes him closer to graduation. Once his internship starts, William knows that he will have to quit his job because the hours will conflict, and as he says, “I need my sleep.” While on internship, William says his parents will support him. Now that William is doing well in school, he says, “I guess I have heard school is number one for so long that I actually believe it now.”

Ava, a White freshman at Gateway Community College, did not grow up in a home where school was always a priority. Ava relied on school teachers and advisers to remind her of why school is important. In fact, Ava has had to work to support her
family and, in doing so, has lost many opportunities. Now she is on a mission. She works hard in school but only a few hours outside of school. Ava wants people to look at her and say one day, “I had the courage to pursue education beyond high school despite my challenges.” Ava is renewing her dreams and energy and this time no one, not even what she describes as “her complicated family,” will get in her way. Ava is a strong student who wants a lot out of life and is drawing boundaries for herself so that she can achieve her goals of a college degree and career. She expects to be the first college graduate in her family; she also was the first high school graduate.

Benjamin, a Latino freshman at Gateway Community College, counted on the encouragement of teachers and a local pastor to make school a top priority. Benjamin was not engaged in middle school and acted out since he was bullied as a child. He learned that he needed better coping mechanisms and began to work with a business teacher who made him feel as if he were the priority, something he desperately needed to feel in a family that was going through a very tough time. Benjamin also spoke to the role and power of faith, which supported him in making school a priority. A local pastor knew Benjamin was a good kid but needed direction, and he took the time to counsel him and give him inspiration. Benjamin was one of the few students who spoke of faith. He said, “I am a child of God and deserving of good things.” One could not sit across from Benjamin and not be moved by his faith. It was clear that Benjamin felt cared for by his teacher and pastor, who both promoted school as a top priority.

Victoria, a Latina freshman at Gateway Community College, recently received her DACA status after having her application lost twice. She spoke at length about losing
energy and motivation in high school because she was worried she would never be able to go to college or get a job on the books. On the day that she received her DACA approval, she stayed up all night surfing the Internet looking up college options. She felt as if she could breathe and dream. Having DACA reorganized her possibilities and thus her priorities. She knew that school would become her number-one focus and that she would be the first college graduate in her family. Victoria also talked about the upcoming presidential elections as it related to college and her DACA status. She said, “No one can take away my education, and if Trump wins he can take away my DACA status, but I will still have my education.” Victoria is a star student and is not wasting a moment of her new immigration status. I would not be surprised if she graduates early.

Charlotte, an African American freshman at Baltimore City Community College, values school over work because she is very happy to experience a second chance at college. As a graduation gift from high school, Charlotte’s parents threw her a big party. Charlotte was thrilled when she received $1,000 in cash and assumed that was enough to go college. She enrolled in a nearby community college and realized she could not even cover all of her tuition or book expenses. She began working to cover her costs and wound up working more than 40 hours a week. She would miss one class to accommodate her shifting schedule and then two classes—until she failed all her classes. She felt ashamed and could not tell her family about her failure. She told them she was taking a break from school. As she put it:

All I did was smell like fried chicken for a year and had nothing to show for it. I thought that I had to do everything myself and never really looked at what could have been options for me or rather the school I went to was not good at presenting options.
When she heard about Year Up, she knew it offered her a fresh start. She applied for financial aid for the first time ever, and her tuition was covered. She now has a 3.4 GPA and feels like she can “run the world” because school now has become her true priority.

In a similar manner, Nathan, an African American freshman at Baltimore City Community College, is benefitting from a second chance at college. After a first failed attempt at a four-year college that left him with no credits to transfer and debt, he realized he needed to re-think his life. He started working and heard about the local community college and the Year Up program. Now school is a priority, and his 3.0 grade point average demonstrates his commitment to school and work. Nathan credits doing well in college to the stipend and paid internship at Year Up. He said, “School is Year Up, and that is my priority. I don’t have to have separate choices of school or work.” Nathan loves technology, expects to go beyond his associate’s degree, and now feels that he can do so. His confidence is high, and his peers see him as a leader, two things that were not the case in his previous college experience.

Work as the Priority

Approximately 7%, or four of the students, said work was a priority. Of the four students, immediate survival needs were pressing. George, an African American freshman at Gateway Community College, has lived in many places during the past few years. His most recent housing situation has been precarious; just two days prior to our interview, he was told that he needed to move out of his home. He was completely distracted and stressed in the interview but wanted to share his perspective. George, who also spent time in foster care, represents many young adults who do not have a safety net,
are barely surviving, but also dreaming. George said, “I need to work more hours now. School may have to wait. Life is not fair.” George is most likely going to take a break from school if he does not find housing given that he cannot afford to be selective about his work schedule.

**Lessons from the Womb**

As part of the research study, I asked students to describe their earliest memories of school and work in order to provide further insight into the value and prioritization of school and work in their lives. For most of the participants, discussing early school and work memories elicited an emotional response because it prompted reflections of parental sacrifice, reminders of early responsibility, recollections of bonding, and memories of feeling alone and disconnected. It is through the retelling of these “Lessons from the Womb” that one can begin to understand the context in which students form their nascent and, in most cases, enduring values of school and work.

*Early Work Memories and Sacrifice*

Discussing early work memories immediately transports the researcher and the participant into a discussion and exploration of class. For many of the participants, early memories of work focused on personal and family struggle and openly discussing their financial challenges with someone new to them—I, the interviewer—was socially unacceptable. Discussions of early work memories focused on parental sacrifice and struggle for 83% of first-generation, low-income students in the study. In Phoenix, many of the young adults came from mixed-immigrant-status families, and work was often spoken of in exploitative terms and moved participants to tears. Ana, a Latina freshman
from Gateway Community College, spoke openly about her family’s mixed-immigration status and how that linked to limited work opportunities. She had not thought deeply about her father and his work and, when asked, she was surprised by her response. She admitted that it is rare at school that she thinks of home and has worked hard to compartmentalize her school and work lives. When discussing her father, she said:

I guess I am getting emotional by that question because I did not want to fully acknowledge how hard my father worked and what it has taught me. I can’t help but cry thinking of my father working in hundred-degree Phoenix weather. Here I am in college saying—oh, the air-conditioner is not working well and then I have to remember, my father has never worked in air-conditioning.

Ana’s emotional response was repeated in the interviews. For first-generation students, sacrifice and parental struggle were deeply engrained and also served to inspire them to go to college. Parental sacrifice was understood, discussed in the home, but rarely discussed at school or with people from outside their social class.

Jack, an African American freshman at Gateway Community College, previously worked up the road from the college loading trucks. He laughed in his interview at the irony of his being at college and interning at a Fortune 250 company when he was not even sure that he ever would attend college. He spoke of work being all physical and felt his mental talents were being wasted. As he said, “I was staring at my future, and it wasn’t looking bright.” On a whim, he decided to enroll in the local community college and apply to the Year Up program. When he was asked about early work memories, he said, “Wow. I can remember my family just getting by. The early story of me is the current story of my family . . . just getting by.” Jack did not want to follow the footsteps of many of the men in his family. However, he understood that frustration and anger as a
result of being locked out of employment opportunities can drive one to do things that one may regret someday. He moved in his chair and exhaled deeply as he discussed the need to create a better narrative of hope and future opportunities for his son, who is five years old. He said:

I make sure my son sees me dressed for work—my internship—and sees that it is in an office and that I am in school. My early memories do not have to be his early memories. Hey, nothing wrong with struggle. But, seeing folks struggle and never getting something in return can break you down.

Jack, as was true of many of the participants in the study, was actively engaged in changing his narrative of struggle. Many participants expressed the desire for a better future for themselves because they were being counted on by their families as the generation that would cross the class divide.

Beth, a multiracial freshman from Baltimore City Community College, spoke openly about having moved 16 times and experiencing bouts of homelessness. She discussed sacrifice and how struggle is complicated and one fix does not work. She said, “I never knew my mom not to work; even when we were homeless, she worked. I learned early that work was necessary but not the answer to all of our struggles.” Beth also spoke about how her mother’s struggle impacted her college struggle. Baltimore City Community College was her second chance, given that her first attempt at college was not successful. The need to work to help support her mother and sister left her little room to focus on understanding college options and financial aid. As a self-described “initiative taker,” Beth applied to four-year colleges that sent her catalogues and then she did an Internet search for schools that had sign language as a major. She applied to a small college in the Midwest and was accepted. Her family packed up her belongings,
and she enrolled in college. She did not realize her financial aid did not cover her living expenses and found herself babysitting for professors to cover her costs while taking out more loans. The stress became too great and she left in debt and unable to access her completed credits. She said, “I felt broken and disappointed in myself and the world.” Soon after being home, she realized that she was not content with a life that was about getting by and not aspiring for more. Beth is excited to be pursuing her second chance now and is excitedly preparing for her internship next semester. She says, “Struggling and sacrifice teaches you things, but it is the long and hard road at times. I just wish that my learning about school, work, and life could have happened much sooner.” Many of the students acknowledged that having hardships delayed gratification and created a longer road to travel; however, the narratives reveal that hardship represents the baseline for most of the research participants, not the end line.

*Early Work Memories and Responsibility*

Many students’ early work memories were framed as initiation stories; work meant taking responsibility for oneself and others in the family. Students spoke to the idea of contributing to a “family wage” whereby all members contributed to the benefit of the family as a whole. Zoey, a Latina freshman at Gateway Community College, began contributing to the family wage at an early age and was inspired by her siblings. Zoey, much like other participants, learned the value of money and personal responsibility at a young age.

Zoey’s older siblings and parents always worked to support the household. She knew at an early age that work was linked to the basics and that every family member
was needed. When discussing early work memories, Zoey immediately was transported back to being eight years old. She remembers helping her mom cook and how proud she was that she could handle kitchen utensils. When her brother arrived home late one night and asked everyone for help stripping cables for copper wires, she immediately said yes. He looked at her and wondered if she was too young, but she reminded him that she helped their mother cooking and knew how to handle a knife. She remembers sitting in the living room with the family and feeling as an equal, as if she were older than her actual age. She said:

   My oldest brother worked in electricity and he would bring back leftover cables and we as family would strip the cable together so that we could get extra money. I was eight years old but I knew how to handle a knife, so I would strip the cables too.

When she recounted her efforts at helping the family, she beamed with pride. She said, “I was proud of myself and felt like we were in it together.” Zoey also discussed how working early helped her to understand the value of money. While grocery shopping with her mother, she learned how to read price labels and understood the unit cost versus total price. In elementary school, she realized that her financial situation was not the same as that of others. Once she spoke up to her friends about wanting something, and they looked at her surprised that she wanted something so basic. She then learned not to speak about what she didn’t have or engage in conversations about wants and needs because doing so made her feel a bit of shame and that frustrated her. The way she counteracted her frustration was to stay focused and be patient for the things she needed and wanted. Her drive to support herself at an early age made her value every dollar she ever received and put her money to good use. As she said:
I would get a dollar a week, and by the fiftieth week I would have fifty dollars, and I bought myself shoes. I felt like I contributed to the family since I was not asking for shoes and putting pressure on my family. I was acting like my older siblings. I was proud but kept that to myself since I learned material things came harder for me than my friends in school.

Rose, a multiracial freshman at Gateway Community College, was raised by her mother and had a younger sister. She understood responsibility and contribution at an early age. She remembers her mother feeling stressed at night about bills and wanted to make sure that she was not contributing to the stress in the household. She said:

Although I never knew where my next meal was going to come from, I understood I needed to contribute money to support the family. Nothing was going to be given to me. I learned to juggle school and work at a much earlier age than most.

Rose started working in middle school at an after-school program and used the little money she earned to help buy groceries; when able, she would save to buy some of what she called “the basics.” She said:

I did not want to tell my mom, who was already working hard, I needed new shoes, I was hungry, or I wanted a ride to school. I had to learn the difference between want and need and had to take a role in buying what I needed.

Rose smiled for most of the interview even when speaking about struggle. However, it was when she talked about her little sister that she became emotional. She said, “I am driven to make sure I don’t have to see my little sister feel the pressure I felt for things or to feel that she could not ask for basics.” Rose’s sense of responsibility for her younger sibling is strong, and she makes sure to give her sister an allowance out of her stipend at Year Up and from her work check. She is teaching her sister to save and also to think through what it means to need and want. Rose, like many of the students in Phoenix who come from large families, feels a parental responsibility for her younger siblings.
Caleb, an African American sophomore at Gateway Community College, discussed how he dropped out of college because he needed to be on his own and had to support himself financially. College was important, but he could not balance both school and work. He said he needed to remember that he was responsible and could juggle a lot given that he did it growing up. After being out of college for two years, he re-enrolled at Gateway and joined the Year Up program. Caleb was quite soft-spoken in his interview and shared things that he said he had not shared outside his family. He wanted to share his story so that others could connect but also so that he could feel, as he put it, “lighter.”

Caleb’s upbringing was not without love, but it also had a lot of financial stress. He was the oldest of three in a single-parent household, and his mother was transparent about their financial situation with him. He said, “My mom kept an open line of communication with me. I remember being seven or eight and her speaking to me about bills and things.” Caleb learned math by helping his mother balance a checkbook. As he said with a little smile, “It was not as if we were dealing with big numbers.” Before Caleb learned about the family’s financial situation, he remembers his mother working two jobs and at times picking him and his siblings up from school to take them to her job and finish her shift. Caleb, once older, would be dropped off at home or stay in an after-school program, thus making it less stressful on the entire family. Caleb made sure to say, “My mom is the hardest worker I know, but I don’t want to do it the way that she did it. I want less stress and more choice.”

Jacob, a Latino freshman at Gateway Community College, like Rose and Caleb, spoke to early responsibility raising and supporting his siblings. Jacob, a shy young man,
barely made eye contact with me and made us wonder if we were going to have a successful interview. After two minutes of silence, he asked me for a pen and if he could draw/scribble while we talked. I agreed to his request and very soon we were engaged in deep discussion about how a family recovers from losing a parent at an early age. Jacob is the eldest of four and is currently being raised by his father. His mother died suddenly from a drug addiction; hence, the traditional notions of a carefree childhood were not in Jacob’s future. After his mother’s death, he took on many of the household responsibilities given that his dad worked a lot and he was the oldest. He said:

    At an early age, I did odd jobs and contributed to the household, but most importantly I cooked and cleaned and helped my siblings off to school since I was the oldest. This all happened while my dad was working very hard.

Given that his contributions to keeping the house moving forward were not always financial, Jacob sometimes felt undervalued by his father. However, he smiled when saying, “I now know I can make the best omelets in the family.” Jacob, a good student at Gateway, has had to share his home responsibilities with his siblings in order to do well in college. He had to learn how to re-negotiate roles in his family in order to do better in the future. As he put it, “I need to think more than for today. By sharing the responsibilities, we can all do better.”

*Bonding and Connection*

    Collective family struggle also created opportunity for incredibly moving moments of bonding and connection. Many of the male students, and some female students, freely associated their early work with familial bonding. Work served as a rite of passage for many of the young men and the first formative bonding experience with a
male in their family. Many of the young men talked about how work experiences with family members allowed them to feel independent and also allowed them to have discussions with male figures over an extended period of time that proved important for their masculine development.

Jose, a Latino freshman at Miami Dade Community College, beamed with pride when he spoke of his early work memories, given that they were linked to his godfather, who took him and his mother in when they emigrated from Honduras. His godfather, a caring male figure in his life, taught Jose what he called “the guy lessons” that you can learn only from a man who cares for you. When Jose was 10 years of age, his godfather hired him to do light landscaping. He said, “I learned how to work and I was paid every weekend. I was respected and I knew that I was being prepared to take care of myself in the future.” According to Jose, the work was important, but so was the conversation. He smiled when he reminisced because his godfather made him feel special. He said, “We would talk about all kinds of crazy things. I even talked to him about girls. I liked feeling useful and spending time with him. Those are some of my favorite memories.” When Jose graduated from high school, his godfather was there cheering him on. Now in college, Jose calls his godfather weekly for inspiration and connection, and as Jose says, “My godfather never hesitates to remind me that I am a hard worker and should never give up on school.”

Carter is a Latino freshman at Miami Dade College who also shared fond early memories of work and bonding. Carter always remembers his parents working hard; he too wanted to work given that he knew work was valued. He spoke of knowing the
difference between great bread and good bread, and that it all came from his early bakery runs with his grandfather. He said:

Grandfather worked as a baker and would wake up at four or five in the morning to go to work. My dad would also get up early to deliver the bread to restaurants and stores. I was very young and I wanted to hang out with him, so I would go with him. That was like the best time I ever had with him. We would just drive around and hang out. People knew me as the baker’s kid.

In his teen years, Carter also counted on the support of his uncle, who gave him what he called “the key lessons” about school and work. At 14, Carter moved from Miami to Orlando to be with his uncle. It was his uncle who put him on the right path. Just moving away from home and feeling consistent support made all the difference to Carter. For the first time, Carter became a B student, and when he moved back to Miami, he had the confidence to continue doing better and ultimately enroll in college. When describing his uncle, Carter said, “I would take a bullet for him. He is like the president and I am the Secret Service.” Carter said, “Stress is what happens when you struggle, but there are some special people in your life that you have to pay respect to that show you the right way.” Carter’s lessons around work and school were tightly woven with his lessons on becoming a man and developing values he is proud of today.

Lucas, an African American freshman at Baltimore City Community College, spoke with energy and enthusiasm about his early work memories. When Lucas was young, he was interested in running a business. He would go knock on doors to cut lawns or shovel snow. Soon he had a group of boys from the neighborhood helping him out. Making money at an early age gave him a sense of confidence and also taught him about responsibility. Lucas’s uncle noticed his entrepreneurial energy and asked him if
he would be interested in working in his bookstore. It was by working in the bookstore that Lucas understood what a full-fledged entrepreneur experiences. To this day, Lucas works at his uncle’s bookstore and said, “I know what hard work means, but I also know what it means to be respected. I am grateful to him.” Lucas is learning about managing a business because he feels destined to be a business owner.

Although primarily it was the male students who spoke of early work as bonding experiences with parental figures, there were a few female students who did as well. Scarlett, a Latina freshman at Gateway Community College, saw both her parents work hard. She would spend time at home with her grandmother while her mother worked. One day when her grandmother was not feeling well, her mother told her that she was going to go with her to work. Scarlett was five or six at the time and was ecstatic to be spending the day with her mother. She remembers wondering where her mother worked and what she would do all day, and now she would have the opportunity to see. Scarlett said:

I would go with my Mom and help her clean houses. I did not see it as work. I was happy to be with her and would do small things that she asked me to do. I enjoyed being with her and we made it sort of a game. I look back at that time as a good time.

Scarlett now understands that her mother was working hard while making it fun for her. She loved those times together because she and her mother would talk about family or sing—two things that did not always happen at home. Scarlett does not want to be a domestic worker but does want her future child to know about her work. She said she plans on taking a photo of herself on the first day of her internship and framing it so that
when her future child knows she is at work, the child can understand what work means and where she spends her time when not at home.

*Alone and Disconnected*

For a subset of students, exploring their earliest memories of work stimulated feelings of loneliness and disconnection. Although students understood parental sacrifice, there was also a deep emotional response to missing their family members because of work. John, the Latino freshman at Miami Dade College, spoke openly about spending a lot of time alone and, to some extent, even raising himself. He understood what it meant to emigrate from Honduras and witnessed daily how hard his mother worked to support him. He said:

As a child growing up and going through school, I always saw my parents working. In fact, they were never not working. I found myself alone a lot and had to grow up by myself. I think that sort of just imprinted on me.

John, a great student at community college, is also experiencing what it means to support family members. John’s father worked on ships for many years and now is experiencing illness from the chemicals. For John, seeing his family work did cause feelings of loneliness and now it causes feelings of frustration and desperation. As he said, “I am young and now I need to take care of my family. That is the way it works. Not always fair.”

Parental figures missing milestones was the biggest challenge for many students. Benjamin, a Latino freshman at Gateway Community College, spoke proudly about being the first to graduate from high school in his family. He has older siblings, but he was the first to graduate. On graduation day, he was so excited and then heard that his father
would not be able to attend the ceremony because he had to work. Benjamin became emotional at revisiting this memory and said, “My dad was not there. He had to work. I hated that and still feel the pain of not having him there.” Benjamin is a strong student now in community college but lost his way in middle school. It was a pastor who intervened and helped him refocus and make school a priority while working. Benjamin was emphatic in his interview about saying he loved his parents, but he also saw that there were significant limitations given that they were not home much due to needing to work to support the family. Benjamin realized later on that his parents did not have choices or opportunities like other individuals in the employment market. Both of Benjamin’s parents are undocumented and working in situations that offer little flexibility or protection. Benjamin said, “I feel hurt by seeing how hard they work and yet I am also sad by what they have missed in seeing me grow up. There is no win here.”

Nora, a White freshman at Gateway Community College, was excited to be in college and saw education as the way to brighten her future. She said, “I have a reminder every day of what it means to not have choices, and school will give me a choice of where I work and what I can earn.” When discussing early memories, Nora said at 12 she was responsible for raising herself and her sister for three months. Her mother sent her money through her neighbor, but waking up and getting her younger sister dressed was her responsibility. She felt alone but knew that her mom working away for three months would give them more money than working closer. Nora spoke openly about how hard those three months were on her little sister. She said when referring to her mother, “When you are struggling you don’t think of the cost of your decisions in the long run.”
As a result of the three-month experience, Nora became her sister’s second mother figure to the point where her sister still will come to her for guidance rather than their mother. Despite intense feelings of pressure and loneliness from her early work memory experience, Nora is optimistic about her future. She wants to go on her internship and receive a job offer so that she can have better choices than her mother. However, Nora becomes emotional when she speaks of her sister. She said:

I am the one she listens more to. She needed more time with my mom and maybe I just knew how to handle it better. Either way, I am here at college so that I never have to be far from my family.

Nora now is a strong advocate for her sister, who is in high school and recently was diagnosed with a learning disability. Nora and her sister are on a journey together and, with college and work experience, Nora feels she can provide the support and environment her sister needs.

Some students spoke to feeling alone as result of seeing their school peers living different lives. Ava, the freshman at Gateway Community College, entered the interview room with a great smile and essay in hand. She was excited to talk because she felt she had a lot to say and experienced a lot having grown up struggling and having to work. She began our conversation walking me through her work experiences and sharing that she had been working since the age of 13 to help support her family. She learned early that every penny counted and, like many other students in the research study, learned the difference between needs and wants. Ava was proud of her work ethic because she was always able to work and also do well in school. She said, “I was that student that loved work and school and did well at both. I had to do well so I became an over-achiever at
both.” It was in Ava’s senior year that the most emotional memory of work emerged. She was excited when she was awarded a full scholarship to Arizona State University and needed to maintain her 3.5 GPA. A family financial crisis meant that she needed to work extra hours. She talked about barely sleeping but stepping up so that the family was not homeless. She worked hard, and when her grades came in, she had an overall 3.4 GPA. She said:

When my parents reached another level of struggle, I worked more hours and my GPA went down .10 and I lost the scholarship. I felt as if my dreams were torn down. What is the value of always working if there is no end and only struggle?

Ava now feels she is receiving a second chance and, more important, is excited about what she is learning and who she is around. She is determined to get her four-year degree and believes that she can prove that she once again will deserve a scholarship.

Noah, an African American freshman at Baltimore City Community College, spoke candidly of living in the housing projects in Detroit, where the cops would break down doors and assume that residents were doing something wrong. He described early memories of his mother working and being on his own as having to develop what he called a “radar” for what could go wrong rather than looking for things that could go right. Noah, who was raised by his mother, now understands that his mother needed to work long hours to get them out of their tough neighborhood, but as a small child his memories of his mother working long hours and his being alone were shaped by fear. Noah said, “We were in a tough neighborhood, and I spent a lot of time on my own. I know that made me stronger, but experiencing and understanding fear so young is not something I want for others.” It was through school that Noah became engaged in
gymnastics and realized that he could be anchored in school as well as spend time after school doing something he loved. Noah, now a strong community college student, sees his journey as one that started with many twists and turns but that, with focus, he can surmount even the greatest challenges.

*Early School Memories and Inspiration*

Early memories of school and the value of education were tightly woven into the narratives of work and struggle. Many of the narratives and interviews expressed tender early memories of books, songs, and conversations about the value of school. Parental sacrifice was not just about survival but was also about teaching a school lesson or sending a message that school mattered and would impact future work and life opportunities.

Jose, whom we met above, spoke of the role his godfather played in his life in understanding work and responsibility, but it was his mother who influenced his values related to school. Jose’s mother worked nights and would come home in the morning, make sure he and his brother were dressed for school, and then go over math problems with them. He laughed as he spoke and said, “My mom had a math obsession.” He smiled when he realized he must have been three or four when she started testing them on math. It was not until he really thought about it in the interview that he realized how exhausted she must have been—leaving one job, getting him and his brother ready for school, and then going to her second job. Jose spoke lovingly of his mother and is a strong computer science student, which owes much to his mother’s urging that he be comfortable with math. Jose was well aware of the negative narrative that Latino parents
did not care about school or education. He was direct and somewhat emotional when he said, “I think you need to make sure my mom’s story is captured too. We have our challenges as Latinos, but in my family education also mattered. Don’t leave that out of the dissertation.” I assured Jose that his mother’s story, which is repeated by many of the participants in the study, would be included.

John spoke earlier about being alone a lot while growing up because his parents worked long hours and overnight. He also spoke about his love of reading and how his mother supported and encouraged this. John’s mother was a domestic worker and had many friends who were also domestics. At times, friends would donate books, and she would bring them home for John to read. His mother, having little formal education, still understood the value of having books in the house and the importance of reading. She would make John read to her early in the mornings when she arrived from work and before he went to school. John would read whatever book she would bring home. It was because of his mother’s friends’ book donations that he was able to create a small library. One book stood out to John. He said, “I remember very specifically the copy of the New World Encyclopedia. It was only Volume A, but I would read it to my mom, and she was so proud.” John realized later that his mother did not have formal education, but he never really knew at an early age. His mother made sure he loved reading and, to this day, books are his favorite possession.

Grace, an African American and Latina freshman at Baltimore City Community College, talked openly about not fitting into traditional classrooms settings. She noticed that she was more aggressive than her peers and felt disquieted and challenged by things
that were happening at home. Grace had a tough time fitting in with her peers and, as she said, “self-regulating.” However, in the interview, she wanted to make sure that I documented how she felt when she learned about the Baltimore port and ocean. Visitors would come to Grace’s high school to talk about local historic sites. One day, a staff member from the Baltimore Port came in and caught her attention. She never had realized Baltimore had a rich port history or how captains have to navigate the currents to go from location to location. It was then that Grace knew she wanted to learn more and got a summer job on the port; she also began reading everything she could get her hands on about the ocean and ports. Learning about the ocean had a calming effect on her and drove her to care for other subjects. As she said, “It was as if I found my friend and passion all at once. I was having fun, being inspired and ultra-engaged.” Grace graduated from high school as a strong student and she still loves the ocean. Once she realized how much technology was involved in understanding the ocean and management of ports, she became passionate about technology. However, she understood her learning environment had to be applied and multi-layered. According to Grace, “Reading is not enough. I want to be in it. I guess I am a different learner and now I accept that. BCCC and Year Up also understand that about me.”

Nathan, an African American freshman in Baltimore City Community College, never felt like he was going to school alone. Nathan’s mother attended evening college and, when not in class, they would sit at the kitchen table together to do their homework. He knew that school was important because no matter how tired his mother was, she always did her homework and would check that he did his as well. On days that his
mother had an evening class, Nathan would go to a local after-school program. As Nathan got older, he realized what an inspiration his mother was and often would think of her for inspiration when he had to work hard on a school project. When Nathan did not do well in his first college experience, he remembered back to his childhood and realized that his mother modeled for him that “work and school required commitment.” His mother is still his biggest champion and now, as he embarks on his second chance, she is there to support him on his journey of learning and seeking a college credential.

*Early School Memories: Do as I Say, Not as I Do*

Many of the narratives and interviews revealed that parents often served as models for what *not* to do. Most of the students in the study are first-generation college students whose parents value education as an important step to a better life, although they had not experienced it for themselves or knew how to navigate the higher education landscape. In very emotional tones, most of the students described their parents as desperately wanting for them more than they had for themselves. There was an expectation of progress from one generation to the next. Parents wanted to inspire progress even if they could not serve as models of progress themselves.

For example, Scarlett, the Latina freshman at Gateway Community College, always saw her parents working hard—in fact, too hard. Although she enjoyed going to work with her mother when she was very young, she ultimately resented the amount of time that her mother spent at work. She said, “My mom cleans other people’s homes with little time to clean her own.” Scarlett’s matter-of-fact approach to the discussion was sobering. Scarlett also felt her father worked too hard and experienced no reward.
When discussing him, she said, “He worked construction until he messed up his back and can’t do it anymore.” Scarlett had her mother and father as reminders of why she needed to value and focus on school. She understood the exploitative practices that her parents experienced at work were not going to be her reality. Scarlett refused to work in a place where she needed to compromise even the fundamental values of her family and home maintenance, a choice many undocumented individuals such as her parents did not have. Now Scarlett uses her college transcript as her inspiration. At the end of each semester, she goes to her best friend and says, “I am one step closer to the life that I want and not the life that I have.”

Beth, the multiracial freshman at Baltimore City Community College, related that her earliest memory of discussing school with her mother was when she was helping her mother bathe because her back and muscles ached from work. She said:

Aching feet, sore back, sleepless nights were all part of my mom’s work life. It was in those times that I helped her she would talk about the value of school and that I was smart and needed to go far.

Beth realized that she did not want to take her mother's path, and her childhood was a constant reinforcement of the need for change. Even with her mother working hard, they would still experience financial crisis and had to move constantly. It was in the quiet evening hours that Beth would understand that the last thing her mother would want for her was to experience a tough life of little more than day-to-day survival. Beth wanted and deserved more from life, and she knew it.

Benjamin, the freshman at Gateway Community College, much like the other students highlighted, did not have a positive early school experience, but it was his
parents’ struggles that kept him going. Benjamin arrived from Mexico at age eight and
was immediately placed in school, where he was called stupid and ridiculed for his
accent. He worked hard at understanding this strange dichotomy of being accepted for
speaking Spanish, given that most of the students were Latino, but not accepted because
he spoke English with an accent. Benjamin learned early to skip school. He would fake
any ailment in order not to attend school. His mother soon caught on and asked him what
was happening. When he told her he was being picked on, she began to cry. Benjamin
was startled because she rarely cried, and he was afraid he really did something wrong.
She said to him, “Go to school or you will be like me.” Benjamin thought she was the
greatest and could not understand what not being like his mom meant. It was years later
that he understood deeply and sadly that his mother was not living an easy life; she was
the definition of struggle. Although Benjamin did act out in middle school, he found his
way back in high school and is now a star student at Gateway. Benjamin is determined to
change the narrative of struggle in his family. In his words, “Remind everyone my
mother is great even if she does not believe it.”

My Difference Is . . .

Of the community college students participating in this research study, 83% are
first-generation college students and 75% receive federal financial aid in the form of Pell
grants. Along with the students’ collective college affiliation and class identity, other
identities emerged as important lenses through which to understand how students
experienced their world and understood the value of school and work. Other strong
identities included wage-earner/contributor, immigration status, racial and ethnic identity,
and parenting status. The students spoke powerfully through the intersectionality of their identities and, as a result, this research study has great relevance for educational policy recommendations.

*Participating in the Family Wage*

When we think of adolescents working, quite often we imagine that the young people are using their money as “pocket change” to take care of social and personal needs. That may well be the case for the majority of young adults in this country who live in middle-class households. For young adults in poor and working-class households, however, financial contributions to the family from any and all members is not only known and appreciated, but in many cases expected. The majority of young adults in this research study mentioned contributing to their household's costs, with a subset of students saying that they were taking care of their own basic needs as early as high school. Below are the voices of students and how they understand what it means to be a wage-earner and contributor.

Emma, a Latina freshman at Gateway Community College, was not sure what her next steps were after high school. Her family expected her to go to college, yet she was undocumented and did not want to work 50 hours a week and then go to college and not do well. She felt stuck, but soon realized her application for DACA status was approved. She was beaming because she could get a job making more than minimum wage, and it would be paid by check versus in cash—as most jobs pay undocumented workers. The first thing Emma did after high school was to find a job at Amazon, which she knew paid double the minimum wage. When she got the job, she was ecstatic at being a wage-
earner and financial contributor to the family. Her mother wanted her to go to school and was somewhat frustrated with Emma’s choice to work but in the end understood her decision given that life had been a struggle. After working for a year, Emma realized that a life of limited economic mobility was staring her in the face despite her changed immigration status. She needed and wanted to contribute to the household but also wanted to go to college. She then enrolled in community college after hearing she could earn a stipend while studying. She had to leave her night job to keep up with her studies but said, “I always think of money. It is key to survival and I know it is the stress that takes over my household.” Emma is a strong student at Gateway Community College and currently placing her need to be a major wage-earner on hold until next semester when she expects to have greater mastery of the college routine.

Ava, who studies at Gateway Community College, was frustrated that she had to work longer hours and subsequently lost her scholarship, but she was proud of working because she knew she could take care of herself and keep her family on the right track. She said:

> I learned that I was key in keeping us moving. When your family is going through stuff, you have to decide to get sucked in or move them forward. I like to keep things moving. Even with my $50 stipend from Year Up, I give $25 to my family. This is what you do.

Ava’s obligation to contribute to her family and her pride in doing so are quite evident. She believes that she will be the last person in her family who will need to count on others for financial support. She showed me her prior work evaluations, which highlighted her drive and work ethic. Although Ava is not working full-time now, having the stipend allows her mentally and emotionally to feel that her identity as a wage-earner
and contributor to the family is being met. In her words, “I am a better student because I can feel as if I am doing something for me and for my family while going to school.”

For some of the young men, their contribution to the family wage reaffirmed their masculine identity, while women identified their contribution with their familial identity and not their feminine identity. Anthony, a Latino freshman at Miami Dade College, spoke of his pride in being a hard worker and contributing to his family. His parents are from Ecuador, and he has worked since he was 10 years old. He would help his father with gardening projects and receive some money. He realized quickly that he was being complimented on being a hard worker and was told repeatedly that he would do well in taking care of his future family. He beams when he talks about work. Most important to him, when his mother was struggling financially, he was able to bring money home and help the family. He can’t imagine what he would be like as young man without having worked or being recognized for his work ethic. He said:

As a Hispanic man, I am a hard worker and once I turned 16 I would give my mom some money for the house. I do it because that is what men should do and I feel good doing it.

Anthony learned the lesson that education is important and that no one can take the value of education from you. Yet he also learned to value hard work: “I agree that no one can take education away from you, but you also can’t take away the great feeling of what a day of hard work can do for you too.” Anthony was so connected to his wage-earning identity that he could not imagine not working and going to school at the same time. He assumes that both are key to success.
Nathan, an African American freshman from Baltimore City Community College, spoke about growing up with his mother and how he felt the need to demonstrate that he had matured by making financial contributions to the household. He spoke of applying for jobs and experiencing stress when he was not hired, but he did not give up. It was as if getting a job for him was like breathing. Once he got his first job, he said it felt better than any birthday that he has had since then. He was joyful when he said, “Giving my mom something meant I was a man and moving forward.” Nathan works while he attends college and still sees his financial contribution as key to who he is and linked to how he views his personal progress as a young man.

Elijah, the Latino freshman at Gateway Community College we met above, learned early that whatever he could contribute to the household would make a difference. In high school he worked 20 hours a week and gave most of his check to his mother. He laughed when he talked about how even his small contribution made a difference in what the family ate for dinner. He said, “My contribution even changed what we ate at dinner. You see, I thought most people ate ramen most nights for dinner, but that was just us. Once I started contributing, we ate different things.” Elijah is the oldest child and feels a close bond with his younger siblings. He realizes that he is the one who exposes them to new things like going to a park in a different area to play. He is most proud of what he does every week for his younger siblings. He said, “I take my siblings to Subway or something once a week like a treat. I feel like I am making a difference and I am respected for it.” His younger siblings are excited about their outings and he knows that money and financial contributions are not everything, but, as he said,
when you have so little of it, you think of it more often and realize that being able to earn money and contribute means you are looked at in a different and more positive light in the eyes of your family.

Immigration Status

In June 2012, President Barack Obama granted certain undocumented immigrants who entered the country before their 16th birthday and before June 2007 eligibility to receive a renewable two-year work permit (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2012). As of July 2014, 587,366 undocumented young people had received both relief from deportation and a work permit out of a total of 680,000 undocumented young people who applied for DACA (Perez, 2014). Within the first three years, DACA has changed 665,000 lives (Wong, Rodriguez, & Wolgin, 2015), freeing young adults to attend college, apply for driver’s licenses, and work in the mainstream economy without fear of deportation. Of the students in the research study, 15% identified themselves as DACA recipients and an additional 7% of students who are citizens discussed the challenges of living in a mixed-immigration-status family. Many DACA students and other students from mixed-immigrant-status families expressed excitement and hope because they had opportunity, but thinking about their parents or siblings being deported was an all-consuming fear and stress.

Hannah, the young Latina student at Gateway Community College, was excited to participate in the research study because she wanted to make sure DACA students were represented. She is warm, affable, and excited about her future. It was when we spoke of her early memories of her immigration status that the interview became quite emotional.
She learned early that she was different from others but was not sure why. When the family spoke of going to Disneyland or going back and forth to Mexico, she was left behind. She was a good student and felt she was being punished for something that she did not understand. Hannah also experienced her family moving frequently with little notice. She realized that her other family members were signing the lease, not her parents. However, it was when Hannah was in high school she learned that she was undocumented. She said, “Once I was a sophomore in high school I knew for sure that I was undocumented and I was angry. I was a good student. Now I knew for certain that I could not get scholarships or financial aid.” When Hannah was told by a school counselor that she could apply for DACA, she jumped at the chance. Waiting for her application approval was agonizing. She remembers hearing all her friends talking about colleges. She would stay silent because her DACA status was unknown and she was afraid to share it with her friends. When she received notice that she was approved for DACA, her outlook and life changed. As she put it:

I felt like I won the lottery and yet I also felt slightly afraid to say I was a DACA student since I spoke Spanish. You see, people see me as Mexican and all I know is America although I speak Spanish.

Hannah’s DACA status did change her future. She earned a scholarship from a local nonprofit to attend community college and transfer her dual-enrollment credits so that she could graduate in 18 months. All seemed to be going so well and then she panicked. Hannah could not enjoy thinking of her next steps without worrying about her mother, who is undocumented. “I am worried about my mom being taken away from me,” she said. “Her status is not secure and so I really can’t be.” Hannah’s worry is real,
and her mother has been clear with her that she would be responsible for her siblings if her mother were ever deported. As Hannah said, “The tone of these elections gives me more fear. Everyone thinks that Mexicans are here to take things away from others, and it is just not true.” Hannah is a strong student and is optimistic, but she is also aware that her life could change in a minute. For that reason, she works harder and faster than ever before.

Maria, a Latina freshman at Gateway Community College, came from Mexico when she was seven. She loved living with her grandparents in Mexico, but it was very clear that they were poor and struggling. Once her grandfather died, there was no way her grandmother could take care of her alone, and she was sent to the United States to live with her mother. She came across the border with another family and was soon reunited with her mother. She realized even at seven that there was something different and wrong about the way she arrived to the States. She was always shy, so that helped her at different checkpoints and she soon understood how much more it helped her when, at 10 years old, she realized that she was undocumented. “I knew and felt comfortable being invisible,” she said. “I did not make trouble or bring attention.” The stakes were high if she were deported. She knew her grandmother passed away and there was no one in Mexico to take care of her. In addition, she did not miss the poverty but still she felt freer in Mexico than in Phoenix.

When I came here, I expected it to be better than our situation in Mexico, but I did not know English and I was undocumented and so I felt less free than ever before even though I was poor in Mexico. Living undocumented is a middle space that is invisible to most people except to yourself.
Once she learned that she could apply for DACA status, she ran home only to realize that the family did not have the money for the application, so her mother borrowed it. She felt guilty about needing the money, but her mother understood this was about Maria’s future. In her senior year, she received her DACA approval and was both happy and terrified. She was happy about feeling free and because she could work and apply for college, but she was also terrified that she did not know how to find a job or apply to college. As she said, “It was like the world landed on my shoulders since I was one of the few in my family to be here legally.”

Knowing that having DACA meant she could get a job and that getting a job required being outgoing, Maria worked hard at becoming more visible. She talked about how being shy and working at being invisible is exactly what you should not do or be when you are trying to get hired. “Once you have spent so much time trying to hide,” she said, “it is hard to change.” Maria did find a job after a while and is a strong student at community college. She is still shy but loves technology and realizes that as her life is progressing, her family member’s lives are in suspended animation. She does not go a day without thinking about what would happen if her family members were to be deported.

Ana, a Latina freshman at Gateway Community College, realized she was undocumented in high school but knew much earlier that her parents were also undocumented because, like many other undocumented students, they did not go to the large amusement parks or even well-known local attractions. She talked about how immigration status becomes more of an issue when you talk about work, and that is why
it is so hard to talk about work. “My dad does construction work,” she said, “and he is treated poorly because he does not have choices.” Not having legal immigration status was a constant reminder to Ana that her life was not her own and that she could easily be exploited. Her parents also knew this and would speak openly in the family about her needing to be the one to change from mere surviving to thriving. Ana being the youngest and the only daughter, her parents refused to allow her to work. Her parents saw her older brothers attempt to study at college but leave right away. She felt pressure from her siblings and parents to stay in school; her parents would say to her, “Don’t get caught up in not having dreams and just working to survive.” Ana knew she had to be the first to graduate from college in her family, and that was before obtaining legal immigration status.

As a junior in high school, Ana applied for DACA and was approved. The first thing she did, much to the dismay of her family, was to work. She said, “I wanted a job but I also applied to community college.” Ana could now be part of her social group in a full way that she had not in the past. She too could get a part-time job and also apply to college. Her parents’ fear of her working had more to do with not having options than with her freedom to choose. Ana admits to being a good student, but she loves earning money and feels as if she will be an independent woman once she earns a degree, something that she has not seen in her family. She knows she is breaking the mold and is proud of doing so. However, her emotions are mixed, given that her family, which loves and cares for her, is not living here legally, making her fear the thought of their being deported. Much like other mixed-status families, they have discussed a “Plan B”
scenario were a family member to be deported. Her earnings now help to support the family and serves as a safety net were someone to be deported.

Like many of the other students, Jacob, the Latino freshman at Gateway Community College we met earlier, realized he was undocumented when he could not travel with his family. He, like the other formerly undocumented students, often wondered why they were not part of family trips to Mexico or to large amusement parks. He too began to feel as if something were wrong with him until his parents explained why he could not go on some of the family trips. He remembers understanding but feeling vulnerable. “Being undocumented,” he said, “is like being in a bubble where you only have access to negative or limiting messages.” In high school Jacob felt as if working hard had little value given that he could never receive financial aid. As a result, he began to feel as if he should just give up since he would have to work in construction or in a restaurant anyway.

Jacob applied for DACA in his junior year of high school and was approved. It was as if a cloud were lifted, and he was excited about what the future had in store for him. He also started talking to his peers about college. He knew he needed to work, stay close to home, and be mindful of costs, so he applied to the local community college. As he was riding this wave of hope, he thought of his mother, who is undocumented. Jacob felt a surge of panic and was quite emotional when he spoke of what might happen were his mother to be deported. He knows he would be devastated and then would have to manage the family. He sees his mother as very special, and all of his family needs her. He stopped to collect his emotions, then said, “Here I am aspiring for more and then
seeing that my mom doesn’t have her status keeps me stressed.” Jacob is a strong student and works to contribute to the household. He remains positive but the thought that his mother—his champion—might be deported keeps him awake many nights.

As for Benjamin, he was raised by his grandfather in Mexico, and his parents would send money to cover their living expenses. When his grandfather died, everything changed. At six years of age, Benjamin found himself traveling with a family friend to Phoenix to live with his parents for the first time that he could remember. “I was grieving and missing my grandfather,” he said, “and now I was with my parents, who I hardly knew.” It was literally from the age of six that Benjamin knew he was undocumented. He learned early not to trust strangers or to share information. Benjamin did eventually bond with his parents, but it was not like his love for his grandfather. In addition, Benjamin’s parents were always working and stressed about money. As he put it, “Struggling is not for the weak.” Benjamin was expected to be like his father and work in a restaurant, but then the possibility of DACA came along. In his sophomore year, Benjamin applied and was approved. Receiving DACA was the greatest gift, according to Benjamin.

I thank God for the opportunity for being able to drive, travel, and work. You see, my parents are not secure but immigration papers is not going to solve all of their issues. I think the stress of living this life breaks people, and I see a lot of broken pieces in my family.

Benjamin feels optimistic about his future but is quite somber when he speaks of his family. He knows that his family is struggling with many issues and feels that they come with living in the shadows for too long. Benjamin worries about his parents’ potential deportation but he worries more about how they are managing their current
Having DACA has defined a new pathway for Benjamin, and he is eager to seize opportunities at college and especially at his internship next semester.

Racial and Ethnic Identity

Below are expressions from student narratives that specifically refer to the ethnic identity of Latinos or Hispanics (as many students call themselves) and racial identity in the case of African Americans or Blacks (as many students call themselves). Many students from both racial and ethnic groups mentioned stereotypes and the expectations people often had of their racial and/or ethnic groups when they discussed their future goals and educational aspirations. They acknowledged the stereotypical narrative but did not internalize it or view it as limiting. Moreover, for Latinos in particular, immigration status overlapped with Latino identity, although in this section the focus is explicitly on Latino identity.

Jose, from Miami Dade College, was the first student to participate in the research study and was clear that being a Latino male was central to how he understood himself and his experience of the world. He is the eldest of two children and was raised by his mother. Jose spoke of being a Hispanic man (as he self-described it) and what expectations that meant for him. Without a father in the house, he took on the role of being the protector and, as soon as he was able, he was a wage-earner. He spoke of what it meant to be a Hispanic boy in high school. “In high school, I did not feel there were high expectations of me,” he said. “In fact, they just cared about me getting by and moving on. I guess for a lot of Hispanic boys, that is the expectation.” Jose heard the message of low expectations, but it did not stop him from doing well and going on to
college, all while working. When I asked him if low expectations were the case in a city that has so many Hispanics, he said, “Here it is what type of Hispanic. I am Honduran, struggling and recently arrived. That signals something of less value.” Jose went on to talk about assumptions of what he could do—not as a way to stop his trajectory but as something that he has put on the back shelf since it is not true or does not correspond with what he believes he can achieve. At present, Jose is on an internship. He noticed he was the only Hispanic intern and has used that as a source of pride because, as he put it, “When someone senses you are doubting you, it is over.” Jose was by far one the most energetic and positive interviewees despite his enormous challenges. In addition, Jose wrapped his Hispanic identity around him as if it were a cloak of strength, duty, and optimism.

Layla, a Latina freshman at Gateway Community College, had pronounced views on ethnic identity and its role as a lens for examining her experience. Layla spent much of her early childhood in Mexico with her grandparents and came to Phoenix when she was 10. She knew of the United States and knew that her parents were working hard to send money to Mexico to support her and her sister. However, Layla had no idea what she would experience in Phoenix. She talked about Phoenix being a city with a significant Latino population that was nonetheless vilified. “I left Mexico because I was poor,” she said, “and I came to America to be hated.”

She recalled an event that occurred during her internship that made her feel as if she were different and deserved a lower level of respect—both of which she rejected. She took a call from a customer who was stumbling through English; she knew the
person spoke Spanish and thus offered to speak in Spanish. The customer relaxed, and she solved the problem. Later that day, Layla was reprimanded for speaking Spanish and was told that there was no way of knowing whether she was giving the correct information. She was so angry and in the interview was still fuming. She was trying to reconcile how a company that operates in Phoenix, knowing a third of the residents are Latino, would act as if Spanish was a “crazy foreign language.” Layla ended her interview by saying, “This is Phoenix and it makes me love being Latina more than ever, even with the negative messages.” Layla is a strong student who intends to open a fully bilingual business one day and offer services to the Phoenix area as her unapologetic Latina self.

The majority of African American students, primarily from the Baltimore site, discussed race directly and unapologetically in their interviews and narratives. Each of the young men spoke about race and how it impacted them and their experiences at school and work. Most of the students mentioned the Baltimore protests and the death of Freddie Gray that took place six months earlier. Although students spoke to the experience of feeling “minoritized,” they did not use such experiences as reasons for not persevering or experiencing failure.

Noah spoke candidly about growing up in the Detroit housing projects. He described the environment as always being on the verge of chaos with officers breaking into apartments seeking drugs or illegal behavior. What the environment taught Noah was that being Black and less well-off financially meant that you were not entitled to the same rights as others. He spoke of having his door broken down and officers apologizing
when they broke into the wrong apartment. He knew that such situations were not widespread. His response to what he called chaos was, “I know that I can’t let that control me. I am careful of what I take in and I am even more conscious of what my outlook is. I am not going to collapse under another person’s view.” Noah also spoke of his move to Maryland and how, for the first time, he was in a school where he was in the minority. He realized that, for most of his peers, he was the first African American that they had become friends with, and he learned to adapt. He also learned that there were preconceived notions of him because of his race, but he did not let it hold him back. Noah found his anchor and joy in gymnastics. Through it, he helped reshape notions his team and friends held of what African Americans can and cannot do. Now at community college, Noah is excited about his internship, expects that he will be one of the few African Americans in his department, and knows he will work hard to make the way for others.

Lucas spoke of his first days at Baltimore City Community College. He remembers being asked by others if he had just been released from jail since he was tall and fit. He would respond with a clear “No!” but was at the same time taken aback that even fitness had a layer of criminality to it for Blacks that was not the same for other racial groups. He stated clearly that he is in college to learn and tries to ignore the negative messages around him. He also spoke about being inspired at Year Up, where he studies with a core group of African American men who are all working while in school and doing both well. He is reminded every day of the possibilities, not the limitations. When Lucas spoke of his mother, he did acknowledge that he was raised with an
understanding that he needed an education because of racism, and he now is motivated to succeed in education despite racism.

In addition, Lucas spoke about being raised in the suburbs, where he rode a bike and was trained to be a lifeguard. He wanted to make it clear that being African American and poor were not synonymous. “Being Black is more than the way folks see it on TV,” he said. “You see we are here in Baltimore and we are doing the right things, but the world doesn’t know that. Maybe I just accept that folks are not out there championing us. I keep going because I make my champions.” Lucas ended his interview talking about the Baltimore protests. He wanted to make sure that his voice was included on record as being a young African American man who felt the policing system needs work, but he is also a citizen who loves and cares about his city. These young adults often expressed how they love their city, particularly Baltimore. I am keeping my promise to Lucas by recording his sentiments.

Teresa, also at Baltimore City Community College, spoke about being a Black young woman in a new academic environment. Teresa always has been a strong reader and loves history. Her most recent interest has been African American history and what she was not learning in mainstream history courses. In her first semester at college, she took an English course that had a lot of historical elements. She would raise her hand regularly and ask questions. She started to realize that the faculty member was uncomfortable with her, and she asked to speak with him during office hours. When she met with him, she asked him if it was because she was Black that he was uncomfortable or if her questions made him uneasy. He did not have a ready answer, but his attitude
toward her changed. “My interest as a student is to learn,” she said, “and I think he realized I was being discouraged by him if even unintentionally.” In the end, Teresa did well in his class, but she was surprised how she had to push to be noticed. Teresa remains a hyper-engaged student who is not afraid to embrace her identity or to speak about what others may not want to talk about. Her fiery passion for visibility and justice was inspiring, and her peers continue to flock to her since her confidence is contagious.

Claire, an African American freshman at Baltimore City Community College, was timid throughout the interview and also very thoughtful. Each time I asked a question, she would stop and take a full minute or two to answer, even repeating the question to make sure that there were no misunderstandings. It was toward the end of the interview when things became more conversational and she spoke about being a Black woman. She wanted to make it clear to me that struggle alone did not define her or every other Black woman. “I know I can reach my goals,” she told me. "It is the others that don’t think I can do it, and that is certainly part of our issues with race.” Claire felt strongly about the Baltimore protests. She would read the papers and see pictures of young people looting or yelling. “It was as if the papers were waiting to show negative behavior,” she claimed, “and yet there was so much togetherness and collective mourning happening that was never covered.” As a Black woman, Claire knows that she challenges others’ perceptions of her but never her own self-image. She feels that it would be ridiculous to live out every negative message that she has ever heard about being Black. She laughed as we closed the interview, saying, “I have no doubt that someone out there said you shouldn’t do this doctorate, and look at you. We are more similar than you think.”
smiled at her and felt an immediate connection. Claire was a young woman of incredible personal power and substance.

*Parenthood*

Another identity that informed participating students’ views on work and school was that of being a parent. All the students who participated in the research study were under the age of 24 at the time of the study, and those who had children started parenting when they were teenagers. The student-parents saw their parenting status as an inspiration to pursue higher education despite the incredible challenges of balancing school, work, and parenting.

Jack, a freshman at Gateway Community College discussed above, became a father as a teenager. An African American, he was raised without his father and, as a consequence, was determined to be present and engaged in his own son’s life. What Jack did not anticipate were the challenges of being a parent when not living with, or paired with, his child’s mother. He said that his highest point of maturity was when he learned how to compromise and collaborate on parenting. He learned that his behavior determined how and when he would see and care for his son. As he speaks about school and work, he realizes that he is prepared for his internship because he can manage conflict and learn quickly. “I am so much better professionally because of my son and my relationship with my son’s mom,” he told me. “I can work in a difficult situation and find a way to make it work. I focus on the end goal now.” At the end of the interview, Jack showed me his son’s photo and stated that his son would see things and hope for things that he, as a parent, never did. Abundant hope, a need to model better decision-
making, and focus define Jack as a capable student, a conscientious worker, and, more important to him, a great father.

Penelope, a Latina freshman at Gateway Community College, entered the interview room confident and ready to talk. She is currently in the military, a full-time student, and a parent of three boys. I could tell through our conversation that Penelope never wastes time. Her focus and sense of efficiency were clear from her first remarks.

“I am doing a lot,” she said, “because I have a lot that I want to get out of life.” Penelope talked about how others viewed her as giving up and being “a statistic” when she had her children early. In her inspiring and unapologetic way, Penelope was emphatic that getting married and having children were her choices. Being a parent is Penelope’s most exciting role and a lens through which she understands the choices that she makes at school and work. In her words,

Being a mom makes you crack or excel under pressure. I have a sense of perspective many others don’t. I know when to let things go in class and when to buckle down. I also know I have great support; I can do this because I have help.

Penelope’s parental lens is both what motivates her and also allows her to make tradeoffs without the guilt and frustration that others often experience.

Chloe, an African American freshman at Baltimore City Community College, avoided going to college for years for fear that it would be just like high school. She worked various jobs and was in a relationship where she had two children. She looked at herself and her future and realized that she needed to be the best mother possible and college was her next step. Little did she know that she would love her community college experience. She is grateful for being a mother of two children because they were
what pushed her to go to college. “My kids motivate me; they don’t hold me back,” she said. “I hate when I hear that kids stop your life. They change your life but not stop it.”

Chloe loves her role as a mother and sees it as integral to her identity. As a mother, Chloe looks at the pressures of college differently than if she were without children. “I would get stressed about little things before,” she stated. “Now I know more about what matters and that lets me do better at prioritizing.” Chloe is on a mission. Although she wished she had started college sooner, she now understands that her high school did not support students in thinking about their next step. She was just glad to leave a high school that was, in her words, “forgotten by the city.” Chloe is passionate and optimistic about her future. She wants to start a business and knows that what she is learning in technology and finance will help her reach her dream. However goal oriented she may be, Chloe made clear to me that her priority is being a mother: “I have goals and I know that being a student and working both come second to being a mother.” Chloe’s parental role is where she finds her inspiration for college and work, and it will lead her to become a business owner in the future.

Ella, an Asian freshman at Miami Dade College, spoke openly about how her life was turned upside down the moment she discovered she was pregnant. She described herself as being young, naïve, and sheltered given that she was raised in a strict household. At 16, she believed she was in love and rebelled. Soon after she discovered she was pregnant, she spoke with her mother and was thrown out of her home. She knew she made a mistake, but the shame she brought to herself and her family was overwhelming. Ella’s boyfriend took her in and then her son was born. Ella said that
whatever shame she felt then left her and she became focused and motivated. She graduated from high school and soon moved in with her aunt. Ella has always worked from her youth on, but her motivation to attend college and work was fueled further by having her son. “You cannot un-make yourself a mother,” she stated. “Once you are a mother, it leads you to do better or to fall apart. I want to do better.” Ella is the definition of resilient. She only sees what can be done to move forward and refuses to look back and feel weak. Being a parent has fed her commitment to work hard, go to school, and be free from a survivalist mentality and lifestyle.

**Support Means . . .**

Throughout the written narratives and interviews, students provided suggestions of what support meant for them and what it might mean in the future for students needing to work while attending school. Examples ranged from supporting the movement to make community college free to providing support for transportation and childcare. Below are excerpts from the students’ written narratives and interviews.

*Change the College’s Way of Thinking*

Anthony, a Latino freshman at Miami Dade College we met above, spoke about the challenge of being seen on campus as someone for whom work is a background issue and not “on the foreground,” as he put it. Anthony knows that many students go part-time to college, and yet he believes that full-time students get more attention, especially if they don’t have to work. It was not until he went to school full-time that he felt as if he were a priority to the college, but the moment he spoke up in class about work being really important to him, he was shut down. “I believe school/college should accept that
many of us have to work,” he said, “and in fact are great at work and find a way to make it part of what we do at school.” Anthony also talked about how he understood America. He laughed at the contradiction of America’s needing immigrants to work hard and do the jobs no one else wants and at the same time looking down at those immigrants. He ended the interview by saying what he thinks will make this country better: “Work and knowledge go hand in hand, and acting like one is far from the other makes us a weaker country.” Anthony is excited to go on his internship because he will get credit for working and have the opportunity to apply the skills he has cultivated at work outside of school.

Henry, an African American freshman at Miami Dade College, was adamant about how the colleges need to shift their thinking. He believes that working since he was a kid has made him a better student and a better person. He calls himself reliable, hardworking, and a fast learner. However, he feels that colleges don’t look at young people who have work experience as having true experience. He would love to see colleges look at the working young student and see them as adults who are working and offer credits for their experience. He said:

I have learned that people who are successful are not just book-smart; they have learned how to navigate different environments, and yet college only focuses on one environment. I want a college that respects the fact I have to work and sees it as important for me to navigate new and different environments.

Henry works two jobs while maintaining a 3.0 GPA. He works not just because he has to but because he also does not trust that his degree or the college will help him find a job, so he is not willing to give up a job that he has now in the hopes of finding a future job.
Many students voiced frustration with how financial aid is administered and how it can lead to increased work hours and/or credit hours. Students also voiced the need for study cohorts and other strategies that are successful with students. Last, students spoke about the need for financial support for transportation and childcare costs.

For example, Isaac, from Miami Dade College, is on his third attempt at finishing a college degree and also works as a manager at a drugstore. There have been times when Isaac wanted to scale back his work hours in order to increase his college load, but he makes too much for full financial aid and too little to add more classes. Like many other working students, Isaac feels as if he is penalized for working. Although he receives a small amount of financial aid, it does not cover the high cost of books. Isaac wants to know why book stipends aren’t offered to students based on their GPAs. He would love an extra incentive to increase his course credit load without feeling as if he were pushing against the limits of his household budget.

James, from Gateway Community College, talked about small changes that could make a difference in supporting students. James’s father had found employment after being unemployed for three years. James then realized that he could move away from home given that the family’s financial stability was assured. He packed all of his belongings and was prepared to go a step closer in becoming a technology entrepreneur. He was prepared to leave Tucson to attend college in Phoenix when a family issue came up and his safety net was gone. By this point, he had left his job in Tucson and was preparing to start a new job as well as college in Phoenix. “The only thing holding me
back was gas money,” he said with an air of frustration. Staff from Year Up were checking in on him and he said he could not make the first day. They pressed him, and he admitted he needed gas money and it was embarrassing to admit that his budget was that tight—every dollar counted. The staff member gave him a gas card. Now he is enrolled in college full-time and has a 3.2 GPA. This is just one example of how financial support for transportation can be critical for many students to persist.

Jacob, also from Gateway Community College, assumed parental responsibilities for his siblings following his mother’s death when he was young. Jacob is the translator, breakfast-maker, homework-checker, and pick-up service for his siblings. When he spoke of his responsibilities at home, he grew emotional because he knows that he is not alone. It is common for the eldest Latino child of undocumented parents to assume adult/parenting responsibilities at a young age. Jacob would like to see colleges with a large enrollment of immigrants work to create childcare opportunities for young siblings, not just for children. He ended his suggestion by saying, “I try and do it all and since I am not the mom or dad, people think I don’t have responsibilities like a mom or dad.”

Advising Support

Chloe, the freshman at Baltimore City Community College, says that she has not always made the best decisions for herself. She did not like high school, had low self-esteem, and tended to fall for the wrong type of person. However, being in college now is about getting a fresh and successful start. She is doing well and attributes her success to the support of her Year Up colleagues. She does not feel that she must explain or apologize for her past, and is only filled with hope and inspiration for her future. As a
mother of two children, Chloe values having friends who are always there to share their class notes and give her a ride to school. When I asked her what would make more working students more successful, she said, “Having support from your classmates (cohort) and an adviser reminds you of what is really important. Knowing who to ask for help, even with financial aid, is key.” Chloe has a better GPA now than in high school while she juggles work, parenting, and caring for her mother. Her cohort is her rock.

Jose, from Miami Dade College, has been both a part-time and full-time student. To accommodate the needs of part-time and evening students, he would like colleges to make senior administrators available during evening hours and weekends. He wonders how a college can function at night and yet the administrative office hours do not match the late class hours. Jose has had to take time from work to manage small administrative issues that could have been managed afterhours. “I know the traditional student is not so traditional,” he remarked, “and at times I feel as if there is an expectation that we will all go to school from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.”

The students in the research study who have DACA status are ineligible for federal and state-based financial aid. If it were not for independent scholarship funds administered through nonprofits, none of the DACA recipients in the research study would have been able to attend college full-time. Ana, for example, was excited to be able to go to college, but affording college was another matter. If it were not for a nonprofit that sponsored her, she would not be in college and would have stayed a full-time checkout clerk at a supermarket.
Layla, also a DACA student, received a scholarship from her college that allowed undocumented and DACA students to apply. She feels fortunate given that not all colleges or states are as open to DACA students as Miami Dade. Also, as a mother, having the scholarship has ensured that Layla and her daughter will be well taken care of when she graduates with her degree in information technology.

*Free Community College*

The national discussion about free community college was mentioned by a few of the students in the research study. Although most of the students receive federal financial aid, some felt that the student fees, books, and transportation costs were crippling. For example, Elijah works while he goes to school and so does not receive the full amount of financial aid. He talks about going to college one semester at a time because he has to make sure he has the budget to cover books and other expenses. He would like to plan his college more than 16 weeks at a time, and the free community college initiative would change his life. “I would love to expand my education more because it leads to opportunity,” he said. “What really holds me back is money. Obama talked about free community college—that would help a lot of people.”

For her part, Nora criticized what she sees as the main focus of the federal government: ratings.

I am tired of hearing about the ratings. They [politicians] are not focusing on the struggling student like me. If you lower the cost of school, then more of us can be successful. I do like the idea of the president’s free community college. Who is making this happen?
Nora is a strong student in community college. She knows that the ratings are not about where she is going to school and feels that her voice and school options are ignored in D.C.

Like many students, Caleb has taken out loans to go to school and knows that many of his peers take out loans or work 60-hour weeks. He knows students who refuse to take out loans but work so much that they end up missing class. Caleb wants loans to be more affordable and believes students should have loans forgiven depending on where they end up working. He feels as if community college students are ignored in discussions of student debt because the emphasis has been on students at four-year colleges. Another way to avoid debt completely—aside from working to your “death,” as he put it—would be to support the free community college initiative.

In a similar fashion, James, the self-professed technology entrepreneur and lover of all things digital, supports the free community college initiative because he believes it would be great for humanity and would inspire innovation. “Information is free in so many other ways,” he pointed out. “Why is the thought of free college such a big deal?”

My Turn to . . .

Young adulthood is a time of continued cognitive development when people define career goals and prepare to achieve them. All of the students who participated in this study are young adults, ages 18 to 24. Each of them spoke of their dreams and goals. I cannot complete this journey with their narratives without communicating how many of them understood the payoff of their commitment to work and school. For some students, the notion “my turn” acknowledged their shifting roles as they became breadwinners and
caregivers for their parents. For others, “my turn” meant the opportunity to be a role model and potentially the catalyst that would raise the family and, in some cases, the community. Whether the future meant breaking new ground and moving away or staying close to home and supporting family, college degree completion was a universally stated goal. Each student linked their associate’s degree with future financial security and, most important, modeling for their families and communities.

*Shifting Roles*

For many students, the future meant a college credential that could prepare them for a career that would allow them to support their parents. Students with undocumented parents felt the acute need to have careers that would allow them to assume the responsibility for their parents sooner. Benjamin, for example, counted on a special teacher and pastor to make his way through high school and into college with a scholarship. However, Benjamin knows that he has responsibilities waiting for him. He is the first to go to college and he knows he will graduate. Benjamin wants to make sure that any job he takes on will allow him to support his father, who has health issues and, as he says, “worked himself to sickness.” Benjamin is not alone in understanding that he has a duty to care for his parents at a younger age than what most Americans would consider normal, and yet he assumes this responsibility and duty with pride. Benjamin would love to be able to see his father work where he wants to and open a restaurant. His father’s goal of owning a restaurant is now a shared goal.

John, 19 and an only child, understands that he will be in the caregiver role very soon because his parents’ health is waning. “My question to myself,” he said, is, “How
do I put myself in a position where my parents can rely on me as I’ve relied on them?”

John’s father, much like other parents who are undocumented, suffers from health issues due to poor working conditions. John knows that every day at college is a gift and that he will never do the work his father does because he has citizenship and is getting an education.

Scarlett is the youngest in her family and will be the first to attend college and graduate. She has witnessed her father fixing homes in 100-degree Phoenix weather and her mother working long hours as a domestic. She knows that having DACA already has made a difference in her life, but she can’t wait until she graduates to see the difference it will make in her parents’ lives. She wants to work as a help-desk technician during normal hours so that she can spend her weekends enjoying herself and her family. When we spoke, she talked about how her working in a great job would stop her dad from working every day, which she believes could save his life. She closed her interview by stating:

I want to be the first to graduate from college and to show them that I can work in a great office job and still keep my health. My parents have had jobs that have torn them down, and I want to take care of them.

Scarlett is viewed by her peers as responsible and everyone knows that she is working toward making her parents’ lives better.

Role Model/Life of Impact

Many students talked about being looked up to and about giving back to their families and communities. Jose became emotional at the close of his interview when he talked about the two things that mattered most to him in his future. First, he has clear
academic goals: a bachelor’s degree in information technology and then a doctorate in psychology. Second, he said, “I want to be known as the person who gives back to his community and changes people’s lives.” Jose, focused on work and getting a degree that will land him a demand-driven job, wants to make sure he can impact lives. When I asked him why, he spoke of how there have been intervening forces in his life that made a difference, and he wants to be thought of the way he thinks of people who have changed his life.

Noah began practicing meditation as a form of stress relief, and it has helped him to refocus his future goals. He believes that we are all connected and that it is through the gift of giving that we learn to understand and love life. “I want to be able to help someone,” he said. “I want to say I felt the love someone gave to me because I helped them. When you have been helped and you know the power of that, how could you not want to be helping others?” The feeling he has from being helped is so emotionally powerful that he cannot imagine living his life without doing that for others.

Beth in Baltimore also expressed a strong commitment to service.

I have always had a passion to serve, but you can’t help others until you help yourself. I have watched a lot of people come from the same upbringing and it is not always their fault, but others do make excuses. I am responsible for my success and I know I want to help those who truly need it. I can also model for my sister that she can’t give up.

In her view, self-reliance and self-responsibility translates into a desire to help others achieve their goals.

As a DACA student, Hannah experienced how going from being undocumented to a legal immigration status has changed her career direction toward one of advocacy
and legal representation for those who are undocumented. She believes that she is on the front line and is active in immigration-reform rallies. She would like to be a lawyer who supports and does not exploit the people she intends to serve. Hannah has seen so many undocumented people get swindled by fake lawyers; she wants to be a fearless lawyer in Phoenix who challenges the predators in her community. “I want to be an immigration lawyer so I can give back to the community,” she said. “I want to be that person that understands and gives dignity to undocumented people.”

Oliver, a freshman at Gateway Community College, escaped war in Sudan and fled to Kenya, where he was separated from his family. He was able to come to the United States and was placed with a family in Phoenix. When I asked Oliver about his future and dreams, he became quite serious and quiet and said he can only look to tomorrow. I pushed him a bit, and he said some of the most moving words that connected him to the realities of so many of the other students in the research study:

My life has been about getting to tomorrow, but I will answer the question and be free for even these few minutes. I want so much in the future that it hurts to think about it. I want a business that deals with computers, a bachelor’s degree, a house, to sponsor my family from Sudan and find someone that I love and they love me. Feels strange to say such things out loud, but that is what I want in my future.

Oliver’s words moved me to tears, for there is true freedom in dreaming and a painful longing that occurs from being denied the basics, and yet the human spirit perseveres—surviving and dreaming.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

In this research study I presented, analyzed, and made visible the narratives of low-income, young-adult community college students and how they understand school and work in their lives. In addition, I sought to understand how students conceptualize work and school and how such conceptions were formed. To be considered for participation, students had to be enrolled full-time in one of three community college sites (Baltimore, Miami, and Phoenix) and participate in the Year Up program, a workforce-development program that places second-semester students in a full-time, career-driven internship for which they receive college credit. I asked 59 participants to write a narrative on school and work and to participate in semi-structured interviews. This chapter provides a summary of the findings and discussion of consistencies and inconsistencies between participants’ lived experiences and the related literature. I conclude with some implications for further research and for policy dealing with working college students.

Discussion

An increasing portion of community college student time and energy is dedicated to employment. Working students have been the subject of research for many years; however, much of the research has examined the traditional-age college student (18–24 years of age) at four-year colleges. This study focused on traditional-age, low-income, and first-generation college students at three community colleges and how they understood and experienced school and work in their lives. Using narrative inquiry as a
methodology, I sought to give voice to students who work and attend community college full-time. I also explored how these students formed and defined their values and tradeoffs with regard to school and work. A deeply moving and powerful set of narratives emerged that spoke to how these students value both school and work equally. Within the narratives, vulnerable discussions of social class and the intersectionality of identities—beyond those of student and worker—emerged and further shaped and formed values around school and work. Their narratives both confirmed and added nuance to much of the scholarly literature on working students.

Community colleges offer a route to higher education for many low-income, first-generation Latino and African American students. There are diverse reasons for why Latinos and African Americans are more likely to attend community colleges and open-access schools. All of the Latino students in the study attended either Gateway Community College or Miami Dade College, both Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) with at least 25% total undergraduate Hispanic full-time-equivalent student enrollment (Santiago, 2006, p. 5). Núñez and Bowers sought to understand Latino reasons for enrollment in HSIs and found that Latino students enrolled because of geographic location and cost, and because they typically attended high schools with less academic capital and fewer higher education options (Núñez & Bowers, 2011). These three reasons for enrollment in community college were reflected in each of the Latino student narratives. The African American students, mostly represented at the Baltimore City Community College, had attended other four-year colleges but were not successful due to financial stress, demanding work schedules, and/or racial isolation and dynamics, and as
a result were seeking a second chance at their local community college. Although 51.7% of all community college students require at least one remedial course, the majority of students in the study were not taking remedial courses (Jones et al., 2012). In addition, all the participants had a high school diploma and the majority had maintained a 3.0 or greater GPA in high school. This supports Carnevale and Strohl’s argument that African American and Latinos are more likely to attend community colleges and open-access schools even though they have the same test scores as Whites who attend competitive four-year colleges (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). For many of the Latino first-generation students, members of their community other than their parents (such as teachers) were instrumental in encouraging them to attend college (Ceja, 2006). For those Latinos who were undocumented and in the process of receiving DACA status, the support they received from high school counselors was weak, given that their immigration status was misunderstood and counselors’ technical knowledge of DACA was limited, thus supporting recent research on the challenges of DACA implementation (Hooker, McHugh, & Mathay, 2015). For a subset of African American students from the Baltimore site, college counseling was also weak; students received information about financial aid but little guidance about how to choose a college. For many of the African American students who were attending community college as a second or third chance, their initial college choices at four-year schools as well as the geographic, financial, and social implications of college choice were not considered or well understood.

In addition to being full-time community college students of traditional age, all the research subjects participated in the Year Up program that offered a weekly stipend, a
six-month, career-driven internship in their second semester, and professional skills training courses (Chertavian, 2015). Understanding the importance of work to the students is a central feature of both the Year Up program and the three community college sites that host it.

More than 75% of students in the study worked in addition to full-time study, even while participating in the Year Up program and receiving a stipend. Students worked for the following reasons: to meet unmet financial need for books and/or tuition (Tuttle, McKinney, & Rago, 2005) and to offset some portion of financial aid that the students’ family could not, or would not, cover (Lenaghan & Sengupta, 2007; Perna, Cooper, & Li, 2007). Many first-generation Latino students, and DACA students in particular, worked to support their families and contribute to the family wage. Although the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data in 2005 stated that 63% of dependent students’ parents expected them to work (Tuttle et al., 2005), the Latino DACA students viewed contributing to the family wage as not an obligation but an affirmation of their strong individual choice and commitment to a tight family bond of support and interdependence.

Understanding Student Voices on School, Work, and Tradeoffs

The majority of students agreed to participate in the research study in order to have their voices heard and legitimized. Many students spoke about being honored at being asked to participate and feeling that participation meant speaking their own truth. My motivation to include the voices of low-income and working-class first-generation students was to fill the glaring gap in the research literature about how community
college students understand and think about work and school. Noting the scarcity of research on students who work and attend community college, Levin, Montero-Hernandez, and Cerven (2011) suggest that research should emphasize the personal and life conditions of students, especially their social and economic contexts. The student narratives in this study evoke the life conditions and social and economic contexts of the students while revealing how schools and faculty perceive them as students who work or workers who are students.

Moreover, the narratives revealed diverse motivations for participation that went well beyond the students’ school, work, and class identities. For example, the African American students from Baltimore spoke about their desire actively to craft a counter-narrative to mainstream media representations of African American youth, especially in the aftermath of the Baltimore riots (Shane, 2015). Likewise, the Latino students in Phoenix who recently had benefitted from a change in their immigration status wanted others to hear how formerly undocumented students and those from mixed-immigration-status families understood school and work. What united their diverse stories was their sense of feeling free to speak about work and social class in a way that was not often granted or accepted in their daily lives.

A key driver for this study was to explore and try to understand how students value school and work. Most of the students in the research study (52%) stated that they equally value school and work, and I consider those students to be in the “both/and” camp. Students who spoke of valuing both school and work often demonstrated a Maslow-like approach to understanding work. It was clear from some of the narratives
that work was absolutely necessary to their survival and they were proud of their work ethic. The way that many of the young adults spoke about work in the both/and camp affirms the findings of Cheng and Alcántara (2004), who saw work as having social and career advantages. Work was also discussed as being central to the students’ core identities and as being part of their “brand.” However, the role of work as central to identity formation among young adults has not been extensively studied. In fact, work is often viewed as a core element of the identities of older students (Perna, 2010) but not of younger students. Work also has been examined as having an enrichment impact and engagement benefits (Kuh, 1995) and as shaping academic interests (Cheng & Alcántara, 2007) while also contributing to building organizational and time-management skills (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Feldman, 2005).

Although the majority of the students in this study worked part-time, fewer than 35 hours a week as defined by the National Post-Secondary Student Aid Survey, all of the students worked in unskilled or low-skilled jobs. In his research on understanding the relationship between working while in college and future salaries, Titus (2011) found that students from high-income families tended to earn higher salaries than other students, even when controlling for hours worked. Students in this study were keenly aware that they expected a higher return in the labor market with their college credential, but without access to early career opportunities like internships, they understood their prospects to be limited. This both/and camp of students accepted the strong links between school and work in a clear and unapologetic way. In addition, they understood that the Year Up program and the college brokered new opportunities through their
partnership in order to increase students’ social capital and thus promote higher returns in the marketplace. However, even though students tended to work in unskilled and low-skilled positions, each student understood work to be central to his or her sense of self and dignity. The young men in the study in particular felt that work represented a rite of passage and was a sign that they could take care of their families in the future. The young women who worked spoke about how work allowed them a greater sense of comfort in helping their families.

Although the majority of students worked between 20 and 35 hours a week, school remained of equal value to them, reflected in their desire to maintain high GPAs. Levin, Montero-Hernandez, and Cerven (2011) found that part-time work did not have the same detrimental effects as full-time work on persistence for community college students unless they were of low socioeconomic status and of minority or undocumented status, in which case even part-time work put them at risk. All of the students in this study were nontraditional and, based on Levin et al.’s findings, should have manifested less persistence and deeper conflict in deciding which roles to play in a “demanding life context” (Levin et al., 2011, p. 69). Yet the majority of students in the study maintained adequate GPAs and were invested in advancing to their second semester, when they would be placed in an internship that would provide career options. Those students who at the time of the study were in internships maintained good GPAs because they were motivated to receive job offers and understood that their college credential had value to employers. Student persistence, despite having what others would label as risk factors, continued, thus challenging the literature on community college students and work.
Pusser (2011), in research on student work and higher education, highlighted puzzling findings on working students and retention. He found lower retention rates for students who did not work at all than for students who worked one to 15 hours a week. Moreover, retention rates were higher for students who did not work at all than for those who worked 16 to 20 hours a week (Pusser, 2011). Based on Pusser’s results, students who work well above 20 hours a week, which was a majority of students in this study, should show lower persistence. However, I have demonstrated that the opposite is the case.

Pusser (2011) and Levin et al. (2011) did not examine the role of college partnerships that support linkages between school and work, such as the Year Up program examined in this study. Moreover, they did not take into consideration the students' personal lives and lived experiences, which greatly impact engagement.

One strong departure from the literature relates to how one understands the African American working student. None of the community college students in the study worked on campus, which according to the literature on four-year, African American college students is a greater predictor of student engagement (Flowers, 2011) than is working off campus. Furthermore, in a study of two community colleges, both in urban settings like Baltimore City College, all kinds of work were associated with lower persistence for African American students (Levin et al., 2011). However, this study showed that engagement and persistence for low-income, first-generation African American students in Baltimore was high, with all who participated in the study still maintaining a positive academic standing as of March 2016. This indicates the need for more research on African American working students.
Of the students in this study, 41% stated that school was a higher value and priority than work. In their narratives and interviews, many of the Latino students spoke of their parents’ sacrifice and how their parents were their greatest champions for them to go to school. For community college students in the study, most of their parents were not able to navigate or understand their children’s college choices, but their support and the value they placed on getting a college education was clearly recognized. As a result, students were encouraged to seek out other mentors or teachers, as documented by Ceja (2006). The African American students, many of whom were earning a “second chance” at community college, spoke about the power of seizing the moment and keeping school a priority even though their previous four-year college experiences were not successful owing to financial pressures, geographic location, and, for some, social isolation. For the students who saw work as a priority, immediate survival needs such as housing were important; a housing crisis can destabilize even the most focused student.

Lessons from the Womb

As part of the study, I asked students to describe their earliest memories of school and work so that we could begin to understand the context in which students formed their nascent, and enduring, views of school and work. The vast majority of students in the study (84%) were first-generation, low-income students, and when they spoke of their early work memories, they manifested strong emotional reactions. Speaking about work is tantamount to speaking about class, and for many of the young adults, work meant the struggle, exploitation, and marginalization of their parents. Students at the Phoenix site, half of the study sample, most frequently spoke about their parents being undocumented.
Many young men cried at seeing how hard their families worked just to survive. Other students became emotional during interviews because they had been making very adult decisions and having a lot responsibility at a young age. Early work memories were also inspiring, with many of the young men talking about their greatest bonding moments with fathers or other male figures who taught them how to work and, in effect, gave them early life lessons on becoming a man. Early memories of work also evoked powerful lessons of what not to do. Many of the parents spoke to the students about striving to be more or better than they were. This message persisted powerfully across racial and ethnic lines. There is great need for more research on value formation in education as it relates to school and work. As of now, much of value-formation literature examines what is valued from the work experience and not what family conditions create the value for work.

The participants’ early school memories were incredibly humbling and inspiring. Parents who worked the night shift would go over math problems at 6:00 a.m. to make sure that their children were prepared for school. Another parent accepted book donations from the houses she cleaned and, as a result, her son learned to love reading. The overwhelming majority spoke about their early years of schooling being filled with hope. It was only beginning in the third grade that visible class differences and shame emerged. Even with these differences, influential teachers, mentors, and/or pastors made the difference in the student reaching college (Ceja, 2006).
My Difference Is . . .

Seventy-five percent of the students in the research study received financial aid. The collective understanding of financial struggle and sacrifice was made movingly clear in the narratives and interviews. However, beyond social class identification, other identities and lenses through which the students viewed their lives emerged. Immigration status, racial/ethnic identity, and parental status played critical roles in shaping how students understood school and work in their lives.

The majority of young adults in this study contributed to their household budgets, and a smaller subset of students were completely independent. Contributing to the family household budget was a source of pride for many, a rite of passage for many of the young men and for those who supported parents. Recent studies have shown that some families expect their children to work (e.g., Tuttle et al., 2005); however, few have analyzed the impact of social class on the expectation of financial contribution or on the agency of young adults who want to contribute while in school. Additional research on the nuances of first-generation and low-income family interdependence is needed.

The DACA program enacted in 2012 changed the lives of 665,000 people in its first three years (Wong, Roddriguez, & Wolgin, 2015). The overwhelming majority (92%) of DACA recipients nationwide stated that they have pursued educational opportunities that they could not have before, and 69% received jobs with higher wages (Wong et al., 2015, p. 3). In this study, 22% of the students were recent DACA students and/or from mixed-immigration-status families. The DACA program transformed their notions of school and work overnight. School became a long-term goal, and work was
transformed from low-wage, exploitive labor to professional work paying a living wage. Literature on working students who are DACA recipients is only now being published and little is available on undocumented working students. Students whose parents and siblings were undocumented spoke openly about carrying the stress and financial burden of the family given that most documents for housing and other large purchases were placed in their names. In addition, DACA students spoke of the pain and stress of the recent political debates, which reminded them daily that their families could be torn apart by increased xenophobia and delayed immigration reform. Despite the challenges and stresses of living in fear of a family member’s deportation, DACA recipients expressed an enormous amount of hope about the educational and professional opportunities available to them.

Racial and ethnic identities, specifically for African American and Latino students, were discussed openly in the written narratives and interviews. Many of the students spoke about the prevailing stereotypes about their groups, but none looked at their current and future work and school roles as affirming these stereotypes. In fact, most of the students who spoke about racial and ethnic identities understood themselves very clearly to be defining a counter-narrative to the prevailing negative narrative.

African American students in Baltimore spoke openly about what it meant to be young and misunderstood, based on the media coverage of the Baltimore riots. Latino students in Miami spoke about the nuances of their ethnic identities—for example, the lines drawn between Latinos who were sponsored to come to the United States and seen as refugees as opposed to those who fled across the border to escape economic and political chaos.
Neither racial or ethnic group confirmed the theory of “stereotype type threat,” whereby they would feel that they were confirming a stereotype through their behavior (Steele & Aronson, 1995). However, students did speak to feeling “minoritized” and to being aware that others had low expectations of them, but they also felt as if they had champions. Having support was the counter-weight to the stereotypes and low expectations that they faced in previous educational and employment environments.

Students who were parents and/or parenting their siblings understood their role and used it as a motivation and anchor for their work and school pursuits. Parenting posed challenges, yet the return on investment for an educational credential was understood and used as an incentive for completion. Much of the literature on young or teenage parents has found lower educational attainment for themselves and their children, with only one in seven teenage mothers going to college (Card, 1981; Card & Wise, 1978; Hoffman, Foster, & Furstenberg, 1993). The parents in the study understood how others may have viewed their educational and school prospects and did not stop their pursuits. Their resiliency and pride at being a parent was powerful, despite being ignored in the literature.

**Support Means . . .**

Throughout the written narratives and interviews, students spoke about what support meant to working students. Removing financial barriers was a top priority, and students supported the free community college initiative proposed by President Obama (Stinson, 2015). DACA students loved the idea of free community college, given that they are currently ineligible for federal financial aid. Also discussed was the need for
non-financial supports that recognize students who are parents and/or parenting siblings. In a 2002 Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) study of community college students (Matus-Grossman, 2002), childcare was seen as one of the most pressing non-financial supports a community college could offer. For students who live in areas without a reliable public transportation system, gas cards or other reliable forms of transportation supports were viewed as a high priority for both work and school success. Students spoke about having work and school become more seamless, as is the case with the internship program at Year Up and also with the expansion of apprenticeship opportunities in community colleges for young adults (see Gonzalez, 2011; Lynch, 1993). Finally, students spoke about being part of a peer group and learning community at Year Up that understood their socioeconomic challenges and the value they placed on both school and work. Learning communities and constructed social relationships in the college setting are successful strategies, as a number of studies have highlighted (Karp, 2011; Kuh, 2008; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Conclusions

Below I highlight several conclusions that emerged from the narratives of low-income, young-adult community college students and how they understood school and work in their lives.

1. Discussions of working students often focus on students older than 25 who have a strong worker identity and what I call a strong worker lens. This study focused on young adults of traditional college age (less than 24) who also manifested a strong worker lens and identity, and yet also expressed that their
need to work and to form connections to work was viewed as peripheral to their schooling. Therefore, low-income, full-time college students (young adults) who have a strong worker lens are often placed at a disadvantage. Encouraging persistence for low-income, working-class young adults who have a strong worker identity requires the academy to create pathways that support the worker and academic lens and do not force a purely academic or purely vocational route.

2. There are 665,000 DACA recipients in this country with many taking advantage of opportunities in higher education (Wong et al., 2015). However, most state and federal financial aid does not apply to DACA students, thus leaving many of the most economically vulnerable with limited financial opportunities to pay for college. Moreover, work will remain essential for DACA students based on the numbers who support undocumented parents and siblings. The pressures on a mixed-immigration-status family are enormous.

3. African Americans comprise 13% of all community college students (AACU, 2016), yet there is a lack of research devoted to understanding African American working community college students. The data on working African American community college students, as presented by Levin et al. (2011, p. 67) find that “work in general does appear to hinder their chances at persisting in college,” thus putting African American students and their worker lens at a disadvantage. They remain invisible in the data on working community students. Work is central to working-class and low-income students and to have not only
scant but also predominantly negative information on race-specific impacts on work and community college students is unacceptable.

4. There is considerable interest and support for increasing the number of African American and Latino young men in college. As part of this research study, worker identity was strongest in the young men who understood work as linked to their masculine identity as well as to their role in supporting their families in the future. Academic and work-oriented strategies that support the unique role that work plays in the lives of low-income young men of color is essential.

5. Much of the research emphasizes the nature of work versus the importance of working, thus reinforcing a class bias. The ability of the students in this study to provide financial support to their families was crucial to them personally and, as noted under number four, critical for the young men who also saw any work linked to their masculinity.

Implications for Research

This research study adds to the growing literature on working college students and community college students in particular. There is limited qualitative research that explores first-generation, traditional-age students in community college and their understanding of school and work in their lives. The data showing how students equally value school and work advances the national conversation, if not call, for higher education to consider combined high-scholastic- and high-work-focus approaches to support persistence and completion for low-income, first-generation college students.
The data further support the emerging literature on DACA students and the opportunities and pressures they face as a result of being part of mixed-immigration-status families. Last, the data supports existing literature on African American youth in inner-city public schools showing how they have limited access to high-quality college counseling and supports.

The findings of this narrative inquiry highlight areas for future research regarding low-income, first-generation, traditional-age community college students. The research study focused on three community colleges that had a Year Up program. A study involving multiple contact points with the students during their community college experience would be valuable to see if coherence between worker and academic lenses resulted in greater college completion rates for low-income, first-generation students, not just persistence past the first year. According to the Pell Institute, 25.4% of first-generation, low-income students attained an associate’s degree or credential within six years (The Pell Institute, 2014). Strategies that can improve completion rates are urgently needed.

Similarly, future studies that analyzed DACA students and their navigation of school and work across different cities, and not only those that are part of the Year Up program, could add much to the literature on first-generation Latino immigrant students and which strategies support their persistence and success. DACA is a temporary status that impacts many lives, and this window of time allows us to understand the greater impact on mixed-immigration-status families, community college, and work.
Many of the first-generation African American students in the study saw work as essential to their community college experience and their identity. All of the students interviewed had a very successful first semester at community college while they worked off campus. Some research notes that all kinds of work for African American students in community college is associated with lower persistence (Levin et al., 2011). Research that shows positive impacts for student engagement of African Americans was done at a four-year college and focused on on-campus work (Flowers, 2011). There is a great need for additional research on low-income, first-generation African American working students in community colleges and four-year colleges.

African American and Latino students with low family incomes, and whose parents did not attended college, are less likely than other students to enroll in college; and when they do, they often enroll in community college (Perna, 2006). Although this study focused on social class, it did not address access to quality college counseling in hyper-segregated communities, though this was manifest in many of the interviews. Many students spoke about knowing the importance of college but did not have a framework for understanding college choices and financial aid. Class and racial hyper-segregation and its impact on access to quality college counseling needs to be further explored.

**Implications for Practice**

A major finding of this research study relates to understanding the worker lens of low-income, first-generation, full-time community college students. Work does not serve as a distraction; rather, it supports a central identity and role for low-income young
adults. Managing completion pressures and expectations for community college students requires a rethinking and understanding of who the working student is and how to combine a high respect for work with a strong academic motivation. Students in the research study sought to have both work and school in their lives; both fulfilled unique roles and aspirations. Students who valued school and work prided themselves on their work ethic, irrespective of type of work and their contribution to their families. School was also valued and was the link to long-term career goals with students relying heavily on their learning community for support. Community colleges that seek partners or greater curriculum alignment are needed to capture the interest and to encourage persistence and completion of low-income, first-generation students who manifest a worker lens. Moreover, in addition to offering a more seamless integration of work and school, community colleges need to incorporate high-impact practices such as learning communities and credited internship opportunities (Kuh, 2008; Harper & Quaye, 2009).

In higher education today, there is a push for apprenticeships and alternative credentialing for specific competencies. However, not all of the credentialing or apprenticeship opportunities are part of a college’s central academic program or allow students access to federal financial aid. Having an exclusive worker approach does not recognize students who want a hybrid experience where they receive central academic credits and then can transfer to a four-year college upon completion of their associate’s degree. Students in this research study want to go beyond the tradeoff of purely vocational training and move toward hybrid models that can promote their engagement and success.
If cultivation of talent were a national priority, federal workforce and higher education funding would have a much stronger link and would be dedicated to seeing employment beyond the college’s doors, which is what the current work-study program targets. Off-campus jobs and internships offer greater opportunities to navigate future job possibilities and link students to diverse audiences and communities that are not found in on-campus work-study opportunities. In addition, employer-driven partnerships that focus on freshman talent, not talent near graduation, can make a difference in student engagement and persistence in college. Brokering relationships with employers to sponsor students throughout their community college experience is worth testing as a way to feed the need for talent along with the need for student engagement.

Students in the study spoke about how they understood the value of money and how every dollar was budgeted. One student mentioned not participating in a cohort movie night because she had her last five dollars budgeted for the week. The need for nonacademic student support was referenced many times throughout the students’ narratives, and other studies such as the 2002 MDRC study on working college students also have noted this (Matus-Grossman, 2002). A key nonacademic support is childcare. Many first-generation, low-income students are parents or play a role in parenting their siblings. Colleges should consider offering on-campus childcare that also supports sibling care.

Although the Year Up partnership is not labeled a STEM program, students are typically placed in technology-based internships that lead to mid-career jobs in the STEM field. Such opportunities are not often open to community college students, thus
highlighting the need to encourage brokers to partner with community colleges to create new opportunities.

**Closing Thoughts**

I believe deeply that talent is evenly distributed across all communities. I also believe and see that in higher education we have not done enough to discover, support, and highlight the talent of low-income, first-generation college students. Today we expect only a small percentage of low-income, first-generation college students to graduate. This means that many college students are unable to meet their own expectations and are further distanced from achieving their credential, despite in many cases assuming college debt. At a time when we should be applauding and celebrating the access to college, in record numbers, for low-income, first-generation students of color, we have to question the intentionality of institutions to support low-income, first-generation students to completion. When I think about the students in this study, I see resilient, inspired young adults who don’t apologize for their work ethic or familial responsibilities. They seek a credential that means something and meaningful employment opportunities that move them from being poor and working class. The three colleges in this study are implementing the Year Up program, but that is only one strategy and it does not support the second year of college or support a student through completion. Intentional workforce programming that expands on the academic programming but also lends nonfinancial support and creates a community of success is needed in diverse disciplines and at the starting point of a community college experience.
The DACA students in this research study moved me to tears. With it, opportunity for education is open to more than 600,000 young adults who have well-developed worker and academic lenses. Yet, as a society, we do not manifest the political will and urgency to support immigration reform, thus leaving many of these students perpetually stressed over a potential family member’s deportation. The rhetoric in the recent political debates has left students’ families planning for their parents’ deportation and accepting that they will be raising their siblings. Immigration is not a simple issue, but when you speak with the students whose families can be broken apart, the need for comprehensive immigration reform becomes acutely evident.

Finally, I continue to think about the African American students in the study who are not new to this country, whose parents work as civil servants and who are trying to realize the American Dream. Students spoke of transferring to three different schools, not understanding financial aid, and assuming debt without having access to previous college credits. It is merely due to their zip codes that such students have not benefitted from high-quality guidance counseling and a framework for understanding college choices. I am glad that such students are in community college and the Year Up program and all are doing well. What this tells me is that high support, and high workforce and educational expectations, make a difference in whether the American Dream is attainable or not.

In closing, I am a Latina with a strong work and student identity, and have cultivated such identities throughout my academic career. I have been able to excel academically because, during my undergraduate years, faculty and a large peer group
understood what it meant to be a first-generation, working-class student with a strong
connection to, and value placed on, work. Academic opportunities were reconfigured to
allow my participation, which ultimately resulted in my being able to excel academically.
It is through college administrators and faculty understanding of social class and its
connection to work that we will find untapped academic talent that is currently being
ignored or misdirected to tracks that do not lead to a college degree. I represent that
talent that was nurtured and has, in return, created opportunities for others. It is now time
for a comprehensive approach to understanding working students and to creating
programs that allow their need for work and their academic talent to shine.
## Glossary

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<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<td>Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)</td>
<td>Policy that allow students who came to the United States as children and meet several key guidelines to received deferred action for a period of two years, subject to renewal, and be eligible for work authorization. Students who demonstrated through verifiable documentation that they met these guidelines were awarded DACA documentation and were eligible for scholarships to the Year Up program.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Participant receives wages for time worked, regardless if part-time or full-time work status.</td>
</tr>
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<td>Financial Aid</td>
<td>Financial aid refers to Pell Grant recipients. Pell recipients are low-income undergraduate citizens or eligible non-citizens. The grants do not have to be repaid. Grant amounts are dependent on the student's expected family contribution (EFC), the cost of attending the institution, whether the student attends full-time or part-time, and whether the student attends for a full academic year or less.</td>
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<td>Low Income</td>
<td>The term “low-income individual” means an individual whose family's taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level amount.</td>
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<td>Mix-Status Family</td>
<td>Families where one or more members has citizenship but others are undocumented such as the student itself, a parent, sibling, or other caretaker.</td>
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<td>Year Up</td>
<td>One-year, intensive training program that provides low-income young adults, ages 18–24, with a combination of hands-on skill development, college credits, corporate internships, stipends, and support. The Year Up program has two forms: 1) a not-for-profit, stand-alone model, and 2) a community college–based partnership. The community college partner sites’ participants are full-time community college students, unlike the full-time participants in the stand-alone model. The community college sites take 18–24-year-old students, mostly federal Pell Grant recipients, and have them enrolled full-time for their first year while the second semester is a 30-hour-per-week internship earning at least nine college credits.</td>
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

WRITTEN NARRATIVE PROTOCOL FOR:

BREAKING THE TRADEOFF BETWEEN SCHOOL AND WORK:
COMMUNITY COLLEGE VOICES ON NAVIGATING WORK AND SCHOOL ROLES

Primary Investigator: Lisette Nieves
lnieves@gse.upenn.edu
University of Pennsylvania Doctoral Student

Introduction

You have agreed to participate in the study “Breaking the Tradeoff between School and Work: Community College Voices on Navigating Work and School Roles.” As part of the study, each participant will complete a three- to four-page typed narrative sharing their conceptualization of work and school and how such conceptions were formed. Six questions are provided later in this protocol that will be used as narrative writing prompts.

Why a Written Narrative

As a way to understand the working student, I have chosen to use narrative inquiry, a methodology of qualitative research that focuses on narrative stories that “tell of individual experiences and shed light on the identities of individuals and how they see themselves” (Creswell, 2012). Narrative inquiry begins with the experiences expressed in lived and told stories of individuals (Creswell, 2012).

Written Narrative Specifics

As a participant, you have agreed to write a three- to four-page individual narrative using the following questions as prompts:

- How do you think of work and what are the assets you bring to work?
- How do you think of school and what are the assets you bring to school?
- Do the assets you bring to work and school overlap?
- Why does work matter?
- Why does school matter?
- How does your family think of work and school?

All Narratives are due October 26, 2015

- Include your name. However, your name will not be shared and is used for primary researcher reference purposes.
In closing, writing will not be used to judge you, rather just to allow personal reflection and document your story and voice. All written documentation will be sent to my private University of Pennsylvania email, kept in a confidential and secure location, and destroyed once I have completed my doctorate.
## APPENDIX 2

### Demographics Summary

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* Names have been changed
From: Lisette Nieves  
lnieves@gse.upenn.edu  
347.834.6740  
University of Pennsylvania  
Graduate School of Education  
Executive Doctorate in  
Higher Education Management  

Dear ____,

Greetings, my name is Lisette Nieves, and I am a doctoral student in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. My dissertation, titled “Breaking the Tradeoff between School and Work: Community College Voices on Navigating Work and School Roles,” focuses on freshman community college students in the Year Up program and their perceptions of school and work. I would like to hear your perceptions of school and work through a submission of a 750-word written narrative. Then I would like to interview you based on your written narrative.

The commitment involves the time you take to write your 750-word narrative, which needs to be submitted by October 15, 2015, as well as a one-hour individual interview with me this fall. If this sounds interesting to you, please let me know as soon as possible. I am happy to answer questions that you may have about the written narrative and/or the interview. All replies will be confidential. Participants’ names will be kept confidential to protect their privacy and to ensure their comfort in sharing their true experiences.

I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you for your consideration.

Regards,
Lisette Nieves  
lnieves@gse.upenn.edu  
347.834.6740
APPENDIX 5A

Consent Form
Research Title:
Breaking the Tradeoff between School and Work: Community College Voices on Navigating Work and School Roles

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:
Lisette Nieves, 347.834.6740, lnieves@gse.upenn.edu
Graduate School of Education, 3700 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104

DESCRIPTION: You are invited to participate in a research study titled “Breaking the Tradeoff between School and Work: Community College Voices on Navigating Work and School Roles.” As part of this study, you will be asked to do two things. First, write a 750-word narrative based on a series of questions regarding your perceptions of school and work. Second, you will be asked to participate in an interview that will be guided by your submitted narrative. Interviews will be tape-recorded and transcribed, and the audiotapes and transcriptions will be kept in a secure location. All publications and presentations will ensure your confidentiality. This research is being conducted as part of the requirement for the Executive Doctoral Program at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: There are no anticipated risks associated with this study. As a participant in this study, you may request a copy of the summary findings upon completion of this project. Upon your consent, this interview will be audio-taped. The audiotape will later be transcribed for research purposes but will never be played for any audience other than the researchers directly involved in the project. Upon completion of the project, the audiotapes will be erased.

TIME INVOLVEMENT: Your participation in writing the 750-word narrative will be at your pace, with the understanding that written narratives need to be submitted by October 20, 2015. Interviews will take approximately 60 minutes. Follow-up interviews or telephone conversations may be conducted as needed. You will be invited to review the interview transcript and make corrections.

PAYMENTS: Although your assistance is greatly appreciated, there will be no payment for your participation.

SUBJECT'S RIGHTS: If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You
have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. Your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study. If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact—anonymously, if you wish—Maricopa Community Colleges Institutional Review (MCCCD IRB) office: 480.731.8701 or irb_office@domain.maricopa.edu.

I give consent to be audio-taped during this study; please initial: __ Yes __ No

The extra copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

SIGNATURE __________________ PRINTED NAME __________________ DATE __________
APPENDIX 5B

Consent Form

Research Title:
Breaking the Tradeoff between School and Work: Community College Voices on Navigating Work and School Roles

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:
Lisette Nieves, 347.834.6740, lnieves@gse.upenn.edu.
Graduate School of Education, 3700 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104

DESCRIPTION: You are invited to participate in a research study titled “Breaking the Tradeoff between School and Work: Community College Voices on Navigating Work and School Roles.” As part of this study, you will be asked to do two things. First, write a 750-word narrative based on a series of questions regarding your perceptions of school and work. Second, you will be asked to participate in an interview that will be guided by your submitted narrative. Interviews will be tape-recorded and transcribed, and the audiotapes and transcriptions will be kept in a secure location. All publications and presentations will ensure your confidentiality. This research is being conducted as part of the requirement for the Executive Doctoral Program at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania.

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SUBJECT'S RIGHTS: If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. Your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study. If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact—anonymously, if you wish—Office of Regulatory Affairs with any questions, concerns, or complaints at the University of Pennsylvania by calling 215.898.2614.

I give consent to be audio-taped during this study; please initial: __ Yes __ No
The extra copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

SIGNATURE __________________ PRINTED NAME __________________ DATE ________
APPENDIX 6

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR:

BREAKING THE TRADEOFF BETWEEN SCHOOL AND WORK: COMMUNITY COLLEGE VOICES ON NAVIGATING WORK AND SCHOOL ROLES

Primary Investigator: Lisette Nieves
lnieves@gse.upenn.edu
University of Pennsylvania Doctoral Student

Student Interviewee: ________________________________

Interviewer: ______________________________________

To facilitate my note-taking, I would like to audio-tape our conversation today. Please sign the interview consent form. For your information, only I as the doctoral student will be privy to the tapes, which will be eventually destroyed after I have achieved my doctoral degree. In addition, you must sign a form devised to meet our human subject requirements. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) I do not intend to inflict any harm. Thank you for your agreeing to participate.

I have planned this interview to last no longer than one hour. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning.

Introduction

You have agreed to speak with me today because you are a student at Miami Dade Community College and participating in the Year Up program. You also have completed a written narrative sharing your conceptualization of work and school and how such conceptions were formed. This interview will expand on your written narrative.

A. Interviewee Background

Background information on interviewee:

What is your name? ________________________________
Are you currently in the Year Up program and a [community college] student?

B. Interview Questions

1. Can you please introduce yourself and describe for me what stood out most in writing your narrative?

2. What are the key things that I should understand about how you prioritize school or work at any given time during your college experience?

3. What has most informed your notions and attractions to school and work?

4. How do you communicate the values of your school and work roles to your family, friends, and faculty?

5. What would you like me to have asked you about school and work that was not addressed in your narrative? If you have a question, please discuss your response now if you are comfortable.


Chavez, I. (2012, August 9) *Year up interview /Interviewer: J. Viruet*. 


Wong, T. K., Richter, K. K., Rodriguez, I., & Wolgin, P. E. (2015). Results from a nationwide survey of DACA recipients illustrate the program's impact. *Center for American*
