

COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS'  
AWARENESS AND USE OF  
COLLEGE INFORMATION

A Dissertation  
Submitted to  
the Temple University Graduate Board

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

by  
Lianne A. Hartman  
May 2014

Examining Committee Members:

Corrinne Caldwell, Advisory Chair, Educational Leadership  
James Earl Davis, Educational Leadership  
Kimberly Goyette, Sociology  
Erin McNamara Horvat, Urban Education  
Michelle Chaplin Partlow, Educational Leadership

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study utilized interviews with community college students enrolled in at least one developmental course to describe how students accessed college information and used this information to solidify or adjust their educational aspirations. College information sources included relatives, friends, classmates, professors, advisors, and other college personnel. Bourdieu's cultural capital and Tinto's integration frameworks were used as guiding theories. This study utilized semi-structured interviews with 15 first-time, full-time, remedial students at a suburban community college in the northeastern United States. Interviews conducted in the fall and spring semesters explored students' perceptions of college information sources in order to gain insight into how students viewed information and its implications over time.

This study identified four categories that broadly characterize students' information seeking and application behavior: students were classified as dreamers, drifters, passengers, or planners. Students classified as dreamers had difficulty aligning their career and educational goals. While college information was an issue for dreamers, they required more intensive guidance about their larger educational picture before information about intermediary steps would be meaningful for them. Drifters had informed educational goals, but possessed incomplete information or had difficulty applying strategies to reach these goals. Passengers and planners were well-informed and had specific strategies to accomplish their educational aspirations. Planners actively sought out information. Passengers benefited from a guide, such as a dedicated advisor or mentor, who helped them to interpret and apply the information.

This study suggests that just presenting students with information is insufficient; to get students on surer footing, colleges should explore both decreasing the need for information in the first place and providing students assistance with applying information to their unique situations.

To Mom and Dad

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank Dr. Corrinne Caldwell, my dissertation chair, advisor, and champion for helping me to see that I could achieve this goal. Throughout this process, you have somehow known exactly what I needed to hear and when. You truly are a leader of leaders.

I was fortunate to have an engaged and supportive advisory committee in Drs. Erin Horvat and Kimberly Goyette. Their early comments and enthusiasm for the research helped me to focus this study. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Horvat for her willingness to allow me to engage in an independent study, which allowed me to delve into Bourdieu's writings in what I lovingly refer to as my "summer of Bourdieu." Examining committee members Dr. James Davis and Dr. Michelle Partlow provided critical guidance to further shape this dissertation. Thank you all for your generosity of time and attention.

Through all of my coursework at Temple, I was fortunate to have the wonderful and supportive company of my classmates, particularly Jil and Rashida. Higher education is fortunate to have such caring and thoughtful leaders in both of you.

Although, unfortunately, I cannot name them here, I am grateful to the students who participated in my research. I deeply appreciate their candor and willingness to engage in a research study, despite it being a very unfamiliar undertaking to them. These students reach for the stars in their ambitions and it's an honor to have the opportunity to work both with them and on behalf of them, as they, in turn, inspire me every day. I completed this entire doctoral and dissertation process while working, which would not

have been possible without the terrific support from my colleagues. My entire team in libraries and academic support services provided encouragement and gave me the space when I needed it to see this dissertation to completion. I especially want to thank Marilyn, who kept me on track and helped me balance my multiple lives.

My family and friends were a terrific source of support, including and especially my sisters, Laura and Adele; my in-laws, Richard and Faye; and my friends, Ian, Kathy, Jenifer, and Eric. To Derik, my husband and best friend, my deepest gratitude for all that you had to put up with over the last five years. I am a reluctant risk taker, so this dissertation would definitely not have been possible without your encouragement, listening ear, and love.

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, who were my first teachers. Thank you for the years of Legos, piano lessons, computer camps, books... and more books. Most of all, thank you for teaching me the most important lessons – to treat others with respect and empathy, to work hard to play hard, and to always, always check my work. This is as much your accomplishment as it is mine. I love you both very much.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES.....</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>CHAPTERS</b>	
<b>1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Purpose of the Study .....	5
Research Questions.....	6
Definitions.....	6
Limitations or Delimitations of the Study .....	7
Significance of the Study .....	8
<b>2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATRE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....</b>	<b>11</b>
Review of the Literature .....	11
Community colleges in the United States.....	11
Critiques of the community college.....	14
Unaligned ambitions.....	18
Information problems.....	21
Community college responses.....	26
Theoretical Framework.....	29
Community college student persistence.....	29
Academic and social integration.....	30

Beyond social and academic integration.....	33
Bourdieu’s cultural capital.....	36
Cultural capital in education research.....	39
Community colleges, institutional structures, and cultural capital.....	44
Cultural capital as informational capital.....	47
Social capital.....	50
Conclusion.....	53
<b>3. METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES.....</b>	<b>54</b>
Assumptions and Rationale.....	54
Role of the Researcher.....	55
Population and Sample.....	57
Data Collection.....	61
Data Analysis.....	63
Methods of Verification.....	65
Ethical Issues.....	66
Outcome of the Study and Relationship to Theory and Literature.....	67
<b>4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>69</b>
Description of Categories.....	71
Planners.....	73
Dreamers.....	76
Passengers.....	79
Drifters.....	81

Interaction of Categories and Characteristics .....	82
Race.....	83
Age.....	84
First-generation college status. ....	85
County of residence. ....	87
Sources of Information .....	89
Personal sources.....	89
College sources. ....	97
<b>5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS.....</b>	<b>112</b>
Review of Findings .....	112
Implications for Practice .....	116
Suggestions for Future Research .....	120
Summary .....	122
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>124</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
A. QUALIFYING SURVEY .....	142
B. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: FALL SEMESTER.....	143
C. DATA ANALYSIS CODES .....	145

**LIST OF TABLES**

Table	Page
1. Interview participants by gender and race .....	60
2. Distinguishing characteristics of dreamers, drifters, passengers, and planners .....	72
3. Number of students in each category by gender and race .....	84
4. Number of students in each category by gender and age.....	84
5. Interview participants by category and first-generation college student status .....	85
6. Interview participants by category by current residence .....	87

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This qualitative case study examines how remedial community college students access college information and use this information to solidify or adjust their educational paths and aspirations, using Bourdieu's cultural capital and Tinto's integration framework as guiding theories. More high school students aspire to earn a college degree than ever before, especially among groups who have been historically under-represented in higher education. Turning to financially accessible community colleges to begin their journey, these students find themselves going in the direction they think they need to go, but without a map to guide them. The need for remediation may take them off course; when they get their bearings, many will realize that they have not gone very far. This study examines the role of information in these journeys, describing how students come across information that will help them navigate the system and how, once this information is acquired, they might use it to adjust or solidify their paths or destinations.

This introductory section frames the information problems of community college students requiring remediation and examines why students' access to or use of information may be tied to their ability or inability to persist. I describe the purpose of this study and present the specific research questions and definitions applicable to this study. All qualitative case studies have limitations and this study is no exception. I outline these limitations, followed by a discussion of the fresh insights and understandings that may result from this research.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Community colleges are an important means of access to postsecondary education for many students who may not otherwise be able to go to college. In 2006, approximately one third of all undergraduates in the United States were enrolled in community colleges (Provasnik & Planty, 2008, p. 2). Historically underrepresented groups in higher education, such as African-Americans, Hispanics, and first-generation college students are more likely to attend community colleges than their white and non-first generation college student peers. In the past few decades, the percentage of students aspiring to a four-year degree has increased dramatically, especially among these first-generation college students. In 1980, 43% of graduating seniors intended to pursue a bachelor's degree; in 1990, 62% had such aspirations and in 2002, the percentage increased to a striking 84.5% of high school seniors (Goyette, 2008, p. 469). With the rising number of graduating seniors desiring a four-year college degree, enrollment in both universities and community colleges is also trending upward. Unfortunately, community college retention and graduation rates are not increasing at the same rate as students' higher aspirations.

Incoming students are increasingly academically unprepared for college. Community colleges have taken on a large share of providing remedial education. In a 2008 National Center for Education Statistics survey, 44.8% of first or second-year community college students have taken some form of remedial coursework, compared to 27.9% of first or second-year students enrolled in four-year schools. Remedial education can, for some students, function as a chance to improve academic skills; however, "less

than one quarter of community college students who enroll in developmental education complete a degree or certificate within eight years of enrollment in college," while 40% of their counterparts who are not enrolled in developmental courses complete a degree or credential in the same time period (Bailey & Cho, 2010, p. 1). There is a remarkable disconnect between students' educational goals and their understanding of the consequences of their remedial status. The message to "dream big" may provide an important goal for these students, but it is not predictive of successful navigation of the college landscape.

For many community college students, this navigation is not an easy task. With the multiple missions of community colleges, incoming students have a series of choices to make, many of which have implications for transfer, career preparation, or time to completion. Students must choose a career or transfer path, courses that are likely to meet both degree and transfer requirements, and a schedule that fits with their work obligations. Community colleges are structured differently than American high schools; students are expected to approach this new system with only an orientation, which is not individualized, and a meeting with an advisor, which, while individualized for the student, usually focuses exclusively on course selection due to the high student-advisor ratios at most community colleges.

Although research on the impact of parents on community college students specifically is sparse, generally students whose parents attended college "were more likely to attend college, to have larger choice sets (number of schools seriously considered) and to attend more selective institutions" (Bers, 2005, p. 416). Since a large

percentage of community college students are first-generation college students, 44% in 2012 (American Association of Community Colleges (AACC)), parents may be an important source of support, but may not be able to provide their children with informed advice or direction.

Placement into remedial courses adds another layer of complexity to the system for students who are the most underprepared. Remedial courses have been shown to be presented to students as a positive opportunity to "brush-up" on their math, writing, and reading skills (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). This de-stigmatization of remedial coursework may encourage truly capable students who may have not taken high school seriously and have since matured, who may have been failed by their high schools, or who are returning to college and genuinely do need an academic refresher. There are, however, unintended consequences to this positive, affirming approach to remedial education. If remedial placement is presented as a brief refresher, rather than an indication of more serious skill deficit, students' ambitions may not be aligned with their skills. This disconnect, for some, will lead to frustration and costly readjustment later.

There are additional implications to remedial placement, including severely restricted course options for students who have not met the prerequisites for many college-level courses and increased time to credential. The delayed start may be more than just an inconvenience. Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, and Jenkins (2007) found that reaching certain milestones, such as completing half of a program of study or attaining 20 college credits, positively affected graduation rates, especially among traditional age

students. Delaying achievement of these milestones puts students at risk for departure over a longer period of time.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe how remedial students at one suburban community college access and use information in order to set and meet their educational goals. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 community college students who were enrolled in at least one remedial course. The study presents a picture of the information resources, both formal and informal, that these students encountered and used in their application, enrollment, testing, and registration processes. Affective responses to information, such as how confident the students feel in their choice of courses or programs, were also collected.

The interviews occurred in two stages; 15 participants were interviewed in fall of 2012 and follow-up interviews were conducted with six of these same students in the spring 2013 semester. In the spring semester interviews, I again asked students to describe the information resources they used since the first interviews, but the focus shifted to realizations that they may have had since that time. The second interviews provided an opportunity for students to reflect upon their information sources at a point just after they have registered for their third semester at the college. I also explored the students' perceptions of the effect of their remedial placements, such as delayed entry into college-level courses or the decision to change programs or modify educational goals. In addition, I collected data on the students' educational aspirations, both short and long-term, as well as demographic information about the participants.

## Research Questions

Two overarching questions guide this study:

1. How do remedial community college students access college information, such as college policies, requirements, available services, and processes?
  - 1a. Why do they prefer some sources over others?
  - 1b. How do they assess the reliability of these sources?
2. How do remedial community college students perceive and utilize college information?

## Definitions

For the purposes of this study, *college information* is defined as the procedures, processes, and policies that students must have enough familiarity with in order to successfully reach their educational goals. College information incorporates knowledge of whether courses count towards degree completion and whether their courses or degree will transfer to a four-year institution (if that is the intention of the student). It not only includes issues of timing, such as financial aid and registration deadlines, but also strategies, such as registering for courses before classes fill up, seeking out classes taught by full-time or recommended faculty, and balancing workload through scheduling or course selection. Knowledge of available services, such as tutoring and peer advising, or opportunities, such as honors or mentoring programs, would also fall under the spectrum of college information.

*Remedial students* in the context of this study are students who are placed into remedial coursework in mathematics, English, or reading. Students are required to take these courses if they do not score at a proficient level, as determined by the college, on

college placement exams. At this institution, there are two levels of remediation, or two courses students could potentially need to take before entering college-level math and English courses. Most students will enroll in remedial courses in their first semester, since successful completion of required remedial coursework is a prerequisite for many other courses. I will use the terms “remedial” and “developmental” interchangeably.

### **Limitations or Delimitations of the Study**

This study examines the college information behavior at one suburban community college in the mid-Atlantic. The aim of the study is to understand the way in which students strategically or serendipitously encounter college information, the relationship to their social networks, and their perceptions of the usefulness and reliability of this information. Since this study is descriptive of one institution, it is not intended to be generalizable. However, the themes or categories resulting from this study could be instrumental in framing further research.

I conducted this study at a suburban community college where I am employed as a full-time administrator. Although I could solicit more responses by utilizing a survey to collect participant data, the nature of the research questions do not translate well into direct questions. For example, students may only classify more formal interactions with the college as the locus of information gathering and not report more informal sources that may have been just as salient. While I acknowledge that these are logistical limitations to this research, I have no reason to believe that this community college is unique, especially in terms of the parameters of this study. Although generalizability is

not the aim of this study, the logistical constraints do not detract from the ability of this site to provide insight into the problem of student information navigation.

### **Significance of the Study**

The percentage of community college students requiring some form of developmental or remedial intervention is not a subgroup of the population, but rather a majority of students in many two-year institutions. Data from the Lumina Foundation's Achieving the Dream initiative shows 59% of students in participating colleges enrolled in at least one remedial course in a three year period (Bailey, 2009). Nationally, across all postsecondary institutions, 21% of students reported taking any remedial course in their first year, compared to 29% of first-year community college students (Provasnik & Planty, 2008, p. 11). This estimate likely under-represents the overall percentage of community college students taking remedial courses, as it is a self-reported figure in the first year of enrollment. In addition, these figures only reflect students who enroll in remedial coursework and does not fully capture students who may be underprepared for college in academic areas other than math, writing, and reading or in academically-related skills such as study tactics, time management, or goal setting.

Students requiring remediation have the same information hurdles as other incoming students with the additional challenge to understand the implications of their remedial status. They oftentimes face these needs without availability of parental assistance, so they rely on the institution to provide guidance. Unfortunately, many students are unable to identify when they need information or, if they get help, they are ill-equipped to accurately assess the completeness or implications of this information.

They begin taking courses without a complete plan. In this way, lack of information can lead to frustration, lost time and money, or, most seriously, departure from the college.

Developmental prerequisites pose a barrier for entry into college-level courses and, therefore, program requirements. This is of critical importance, as recent research has shown that each of these transitions is accompanied by attrition. Bahr (2012) found “students depart from the remedial math and writing sequences (although not necessarily from college) at an increasing rate with each successive step” (p. 687). Even after developmental course sequences are complete, students who enter a program and make progress by earning required credits are more likely to persist and complete a credential (Jenkins & Cho, 2012). Highly structured programs, particularly those found in the allied health fields and in private two-year colleges tend to have higher rates of completion than in general studies curricula (Jacobson & Mokher, 2009; Person, Rosenbaum, & Deil-Amen, 2006). Drawing on interdisciplinary research on the economics and psychology of choice, Scott-Clayton (2011) suggests that the lack of options in structured pathways reduce the need for specialized information as well as the chance for mis-steps in progress toward credential. The need for remediation pushes back students’ potential entry into these programs, leaving developmental students in a state of academic purgatory, seeking a pathway to the pathway.

There is some evidence that this lack of information is associated with student attrition, but the nature of this relationship is currently unclear (Rosenbaum et al., 2006). Several recent studies examine the correlation of various institutional, program, and student characteristics on persistence in both the community college student population at

large and on remedial students specifically (Calcagno et al., 2007; Goble, Rosenbaum, & Stephan, 2008; Hawley & Harris, 2006). However, these are primarily quantitative studies drawn from survey data that do not shed light on how or why certain characteristics or programs, such as first-year experience programs, help students persist. Studies have also identified that reliable institutional information sources are indicative of successful social integration, which has been correlated with persistence (Karp, Hughes, & O'Gara, 2011; Person et al., 2006). A better understanding of how community college students access information and incorporate it into their decision making could lead to further research on the impact of information networks on student persistence.

In its adoption of Bourdieu's cultural capital theory as a guiding premise, this research provides insight into the applicability of this theory to student information behavior at the community college level. Cultural capital has been operationalized in a variety of ways historically, globally, and across educational sectors. By examining students' perception of their own access to and use of college information, this study can strengthen our understanding of the applicability of cultural capital, as conceptualized as informational capital, to the community college setting.

This study may contribute to the existing body of literature in several ways, including investigating the relationship between college information and student goal formation, providing additional insight into how institutional or student characteristics may affect retention, and adding to qualitative research on community college student persistence.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### Review of the Literature

The literature review will begin with an overview of American community colleges, with a focus on how their multiple missions have developed over time. The comprehensive community college is an important context to explore, as it may present navigational challenges for students. I will then describe the increasing role of the community college in remedial education and the unaligned ambitions of students who may not be college ready. Finally, I will outline the research that describes information problems experienced by students in the community college setting and the steps that the sector has taken to address them. Only a few studies have specifically examined students' information problems. However, college information and students' ability or inability to connect with it has been tangentially tied to the study of institutional characteristics and the impact of these characteristics on student persistence.

**Community colleges in the United States.** A bachelor's degree is the dream of more and more American high school students. Educational aspirations of all students, but particularly nonwhite students, have risen dramatically in the last five decades. It is not a coincidence that community college enrollment has mirrored this increased interest in postsecondary educational opportunities. Although junior colleges, as they were originally christened, were scattered throughout the United States since the early twentieth century, it was not until the 1960s that the ability to access local, affordable higher education really took hold. Enrollment in community colleges grew by over 230%

from 1965 to 1975 (Hagedorn, 2010, p. 185). From the beginning, community colleges provided a workforce development role, with special attention to the needs of the surrounding community. The transfer mission, the provision of the first two years of undergraduate study, was an additional benefit that, in many community college systems, came to overtake the original professional and technical focus. This tension between the transfer and career preparation missions continues, further complicated by the movement among some community colleges to expand to offer baccalaureate degrees.

The geographical location of community colleges brought opportunity to rural areas and to students whose work or family responsibilities prevented them from attending a residential four-year campus. Tuition rates at community colleges, typically half or less than those of their public four-year counterparts in the 1960s, enabled access for students who could not otherwise afford college, including many working class, first-generation, and minority students. In addition, community colleges adopted open admissions policies, which stripped away barriers of poor academic preparation and membership in the elite social networks that often accompanied admission to four-year colleges and universities. The ability of community colleges to address geographic, economic, and academic barriers to college access continues to make community colleges not simply a choice, but sometimes the only option for a considerable proportion of students with higher education aspirations.

There are competing explanations for the dramatic growth of American community colleges. Although they provide access to higher education to a large percentage of American undergraduate and underserved populations in particular,

community colleges remain marginalized institutions. Brint and Karabel (1989) describe the growth of the community college system as a result of students who are unwanted in the four-year universities. More recently, the increasing relegation of the responsibility of remedial education to community colleges is further evidence of the two-year sector as a dumping (or proving) ground for students who might mar universities' selectivity and, therefore, prestige. Others challenge that, cloaked in language of access to render them acceptable to a liberal higher education sector, two-year colleges maintain the status quo and curb social mobility. These authors (Bowles & Gintis, 1976/2011; Karabel, 1972) see community colleges as primarily serving business interests through vocational training. Dougherty (1994) adds that community colleges have also served political ends, which, in his opinion, have driven community colleges to become everything to everybody.

The comprehensive community college has multiple missions, some of which can be seen as conflicting and even paradoxical. For some students, the community college serves as the stepping stone on the way to a four-year degree in its transfer role. However, many community colleges also have substantial, often noncredit, workforce development offerings. The tension between separate transfer and vocational paths has somewhat lessened in the past decades, with more four-year institutions offering bachelor's degrees in areas such as hospitality, criminal justice, and other fields that typically terminated at the associates level (Morest, 2006). Critics have questioned whether community colleges can simultaneously maintain the academic programs necessary for articulation with universities while remaining flexible enough to respond to local labor concerns (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006).

Community colleges continue to present the most affordable alternative among postsecondary options, with average annual tuition and fees coming in at just under \$3000, compared to \$8200 at public, four-year institutions (AACC, 2012). While the access mission may be the defining characteristic of community colleges, the sector has been criticized for curbing educational aspirations of students and for dismal persistence and graduation rates.

**Critiques of the community college.** The multiple missions of the community college have historically been viewed as separate tracks: the technical track in which students pursue a certificate or associate's degree and then enter the workforce, the transfer track in which students obtain an associate's degree or simply take a number of credits and then transfer to a four-year institution, and the continuing education track, in which students may take classes, often non-credit-bearing, for professional development or personal enrichment. Depending on local emphasis, other possible tracks include contracted training courses, baccalaureate degrees, and dual-enrollment.

Clark (1960) leveled criticism at community college advisors for diverting students on the transfer track to programs that had limited opportunities beyond the two-year associate's degree, such as automotive technology, construction, and other trades. Labeled "cooling out," the theory states that, rather than providing the additional academic or social supports that underprepared students needed to achieve their transfer goals, students were instead encouraged to pursue a degree that, based on their underpreparedness, they may be more likely to succeed in obtaining. Clark (1960) posited

that the access to the transferable curriculum, which supported the students' aspirations, was more important than the greater likelihood of success in the vocational curriculum.

It is important to note that the context from which the cooling out thesis emerged is now over five decades old. Both the higher education and employment landscapes have shifted, rendering the idea of completely separate academic and vocational tracks relatively obsolete. In recent decades, the career and technical education programs into which underprepared students were formerly “cooled out” have become more advanced, requiring academic skills equivalent to their transfer track counterparts. Vocational pathways are, in many cases, no longer terminal degrees, with almost equal numbers of Associate in Applied Science (AAS) graduates pursuing four-year degrees as their transfer, liberal arts counterparts (Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010, p. 42). Colleges and universities, increasingly competing for tuition dollars, have developed bachelor’s degrees in areas traditionally in the domain of community colleges. Linkages between the vocational and academic curricula have been established through the federal Perkins grant program, which funds many of the vocational educational opportunities in the United States.

Associate degree or certificate holders in areas of nursing, allied health, and technology fields can find lucrative careers, as evidenced by the growing number of bachelor's degree holders returning to community colleges to gain certification in these areas. Both the career and transfer programs can provide students with opportunities to career entry and, increasingly, both can prepare students for further postsecondary study. In one study of a Florida cohort of students, Jacobson and Mokher (2009) found that low-

performing students who persisted past the first year of college had the greatest chance of earning a credential when they chose a health-related or professional degree path at the two-year college. "Among students with two-year credentials, certificate students are far more likely to concentrate in career-oriented fields which are associated with much higher returns than the more academically oriented fields" (p. 28). As such, the transfer path is no longer the only means for securing an economically beneficial credential.

Just as in 1960, many community college students are largely unprepared for the transfer curriculum. Unfortunately, today, the vocational programs are similarly out of reach. Deil-Amen and DeLuca (2010) lament, "despite the open access provided by community colleges generally, entry into many applied associates degree programs is, in no way, open. Some require a level of academic performance beyond that required to enter more traditional degree programs" (p. 34). They argue that a new group of students has emerged, that of the "underserved third." These are students who "are neither college-ready nor in an identifiable career curriculum" (p. 28). Unable to take full advantage of either the transfer or career pathways, this group of students is more likely to accumulate credits without making progress in a specific program and is more likely to be enrolled in remedial coursework. Rather than being "cooled out," these are the students most likely to be dropping out or diverted into fields requiring the most minimum of entry requirements. Unfortunately, these are the same career areas with the lowest earning power, such as childcare, human services, and hospitality.

Cooling out can also be viewed as dampening students' higher education aims, be they vocational or transfer oriented. Recent research has examined community colleges'

potential role in diminishing (cooling out), holding steady, or raising (warming up) educational aspirations. Several studies have shown that community colleges engage more in "warming up" students, encouraging them to pursue their educational goals. "At *both* types of schools [two- and four-year], those with high-intensity enrollment histories generally hold steady to their original goals or, if they are not college oriented initially, warm up to the idea of finishing college" (Alexander, Bozick, & Entwisle, 2008, p. 389). Clark focused on academic advisors as the source of much of the cooling out process; however, recent research does not support this conclusion. In his longitudinal data analysis of California community college students, Bahr (2008) found that advising appears to have a beneficial effect on students' educational outcomes, particularly among students enrolled in remedial courses.

It is clear that more and more students are viewing college attendance as a predetermined choice. Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum's (2002) study on the "unintended consequences of stigma-free remediation," shows a similar trend in the attitudes of community college personnel. They concluded that "nonstigmatized counseling may solve the old complaints about cooling out but may raise additional concerns about candor and deception" (p. 265). Students are being encouraged to take the necessary remedial coursework for entry into the transfer or the increasingly competitive and challenging vocational programs. "Although students at two-year colleges often fall short of realizing their goals, on balance, the institutional press at these schools encourages, not discourages, high ambition, at least for those who evidence a high motivation by

amassing credits" (Alexander et al., 2008, p. 390). Indeed, persistence levels were similar at the two-year and four-year levels for students who had accumulated over 24 credits.

Making students aware of the implications of remedial coursework could be labeled as "cooling out," but it could also be seen as preparatory. Students who have to overcome difficult work schedules, access child care, or confront transportation issues do face setbacks, but their realization that these issues may present a barrier seems to strengthen their resolve to proactively find solutions. The students in Hawley and Harris' (2006) study benefited from being aware of their challenges:

These students understand their issues up front and have their expectations under control, thus planning for the solutions well before they get to college. For these students, their motivation to stay in school may be driven by the very barriers that they expect could be a problem. They plan for the expected problems and move forward in spite of them. (p. 132)

In this way, their ambitions are aligned with reality. Similarly, community college students should fully understand the implications of remedial placement. Such an understanding, if presented in a way that is not stigmatizing, may help students to anticipate delays and mentally prepare to face them.

**Unaligned ambitions.** Although there was considerable focus, especially in the 1990s, on raising academic expectations of students, the sharp increase in professed educational goals has diminished the attention on high school students' ambitions and increased the emphasis on success, particularly college graduation rates. Nowhere is this attention more evident than in the community college sector. Before I turn to examining

institutional responses to low graduation and transfer rates, I would like to first examine the phenomenon of increased educational ambitions among American teenagers.

In 1974, 61% of young adults were not enrolled in postsecondary education two years after graduating high school. By 2006, this percentage had decreased to 23% (Ingells, Glennie, & Lauff, 2012, p. 24). Community college enrollment figures reflect this growing interest in higher education. As of 2009, almost half of all undergraduates in the United States attend a public two-year college. In their book, *The Ambitious Generation*, describing the rising aspirations of teenagers and young adults, Schneider and Stevenson (1999) pose several key questions:

The two-year college route is being chosen by more students with the ambition to attain a bachelor's degree. This creates an ambition paradox: students with high ambitions are choosing an educational route with low odds of success. How do they adapt to being caught in their ambition paradox? Do they drop out of the two-year college? Or do they cling to their dreams and persist in their efforts to earn a bachelor's degree? (p. 218)

High expectations of students are not necessarily created equal, making Schneider and Stevenson's questions even more relevant as the "college for all" message becomes more pervasive. While raising ambitions, particularly of historically underserved groups, is laudable, if that encouragement is not accompanied by information, dreams will remain just that for many students. "Similar goals, such as the bachelor's degree goals of an affluent student and a poor student, can often develop within very different contexts drawing from very different amounts and types of information, support and encouragement" (Deil-Amen, 2007, p. 8). It remains to be seen if high ambitions alone are sufficient enough to pull students through their academic challenges.

For the increasing number of students with the goal of completing a four-year degree, researchers are beginning to look at how informed these goals actually are. Deil-Amen (2007) examines what she refers to as students' "constitutions," or the bases of their educational aspirations. She argues that it is not the level of education that students want to achieve or even their commitment to their goals that is predictive of success, but, rather, it is their constitutions. On the surface, these students' educational goals are the same, but, she argues, "we need to consider both the *foundation* and *stability* of students' college plans, goals, expectations, and/or aspirations" (p. 5). The foundation of students' academic goals is the basis on which they were made.

Research on the educational aspirations of middle-school students suggests that students may have similar ambitions, but their understanding of the paths to these destinations are very different. Similarly to Deil-Amen's focus on the foundation and stability of college ambitions, Oyserman, Johnson, and James (2011) suggest that students' ability to articulate specific actions or behaviors needed to succeed plays a role in their ability to fulfill their educational goals. In their work, students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds would describe general techniques to be academically successful, such as "working hard," while their higher SES counterparts cited more specific tactics, such as "doing homework every night" and "staying out of trouble." (Oyserman et al., 2011). Although both groups of students had similar educational goals, those who were relatively advantaged had clearer paths to their educational destinations. Community colleges students are not as likely to possess specific strategies to reach their

educational goals as their four-year college student peers, who, as a group, have greater financial and information resources.

The persistence and graduation rates of community colleges lag behind four-year colleges. According to NCES data (Provasnik & Planty, 2008), just over 80% of first-time undergraduates attending four-year schools in 2003-2004 were still enrolled or had completed a degree in 2006. At the community college, only 55% remained enrolled or had completed a degree within the same time frame (p. 23). Some of the discrepancy in persistence rates is accounted for by the number of students who attend community college without an intention to graduate with an associate's degree. However, the percentage of community college students who intended to transfer who remained enrolled is just over 60% (p. 23). Even for students who do intend to graduate, community college students are far more likely to attend part-time and will not complete their degree in the three year time frame set by the Department of Education for the purposes of calculating graduation rates. Next, I will describe some of the difficulties students experience in trying to plan and to navigate the community college environment.

**Information problems.** In their two-year College to Career study, researchers Deil-Amen, Person, and Rosenbaum identified information gaps for community college students in several different contexts (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002; Person et al., 2006; Rosenbaum et al., 2006). Before this large ethnographic study, very little work had been done on information needs and information seeking related to academic goals, although models can be drawn from past work on high school students' access to and use of information concerning college choice (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Liou,

Antrop-Gonzalez, & Cooper, 2009; Vargas, 2004), financial aid (Zeidner, 2006), and career choice (Makela, 2006).

Person et al. (2006) compared two-year, private, occupational college's programs to the traditional community college's smorgasbord of choices. They found less confusion among the students they interviewed in the highly-structured occupational colleges. Almost half (43%) of community college students reported having taken a course that he or she later found out did not apply to a degree, while only 23% of occupational college students reported the same (p. 387). While community college administrators claimed that students have access to course and program requirements through the college catalog, content analysis revealed that this information was vague and students would be ill-prepared to attempt to apply the documented requirements on their own, even if they attempted to seek out such information in the first place. Given the high student-to-advisor ratio in many community colleges, the researchers suggest that schools examine additional ways to help students navigate college procedures and requirements. The researchers also describe how the occupational two-year colleges in their sample did several things to reduce the amount of information students needed in order to successfully complete their programs (Person et al., 2006). These schools provided more structure in the form of programs, advising, and peer support. Although they offered fewer choices, the highly-structured programs removed some of the barriers that students may face in navigating the complex constellation of community college course offerings.

Scott-Clayton (2011) reviews the literature outlining problems arising from community colleges' multiple missions and lack of structure. The complexity of many

community college structures requires more information to navigate among a population who is less likely to possess this needed know-how. She describes community colleges as taking a "laissez-faire approach," which rewards students who are able to be proactive in examining the choices and collecting information and demanding assistance. However, as Lareau's (1987, 2003) research has suggested, poor and working-class students are less likely to be comfortable taking this kind of proactive approach to navigating educational institutions. These families are more likely than their middle-class counterparts to defer to teachers, or, in this case, instructors and counselors.

Perhaps this need for structure or more implicit trust in the organization on the part of working-class students lead to Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum's (2002) uncovering of information problems specific to the remedial student population. They found that "over 73 percent of the students who had taken remedial courses were either unclear or wrong about the actual status of their remedial credits" (p. 262). Interviews with remedial students revealed that students were given information about their placement test results, but the ramifications of remedial placement, such as increased time to degree, were not explained.

In addition to complex structures that require students to gain information that they may or may not know that they need, students must also align their expectations about college with reality. "Students with ill-defined meaning-making systems about college and college-going will likely have vague or inaccurate notions of college and what will occur. Such students may appear to be committed to the institution, but this 'commitment' is based on inaccurate information" (Kuh & Love, 2000, p. 202). Deil-

Amen and Rosenbaum (2002) found these misunderstandings in the case of their remedial students, who did not truly grasp the implications of their placement in developmental courses. As a result, students were often unaware of the true length and cost of their programs. In their aptly titled paper, "Information is Not Enough," Naffziger and Rosenbaum (2009) expand on the gaps in students' college knowledge and the implications of failing to react based on that information. "Besides acquiring information, we find that they need more, including knowing what to do with information once they receive it" (Naffziger & Rosenbaum, 2009, p. 3-4).

As open access institutions, most community colleges employ placement tests to determine academic readiness. As a result, many students are placed into developmental courses, delaying their degree progression and reducing their chances of persisting. These placement tests are another location where students experience a significant lack of information. Students do not grasp the full implication of their scores nor the often stringent policies regarding retesting and are not aware of the type of material covered or even of the need to prepare for the tests (Safran & Visher, 2010). Researchers Fay, Bickerstaff, and Hodara (2013) found that 69% of the students in their survey did not prepare for the college's placement exams. The four institutions in the study failed to make clear that preparation materials were available. The most common reason that students did not prepare for placement exams was that they "did not know about their college's preparation materials" (p. 3). Others, particularly students with low confidence in their math skills, did not prepare because they were afraid that refreshing their skills for the test would place them in a higher level of math than they felt they could handle.

The colleges presented the placement tests as more of a diagnostic tool than as a high-stakes exam that students would be well-served to prepare to take.

In his examination of the advising services offered by community colleges, Grubb (2001) found that counselors are responsible for career services, emotional and personal counseling, academic advising, and transfer services. With all that they are asked to accomplish, advising sessions sometimes become an "information dump." Unfortunately, "information is necessary, but rarely sufficient" (p. 11); students need guidance in interpreting and applying the information provided by advisors. Still, Bahr (2008) found that "advising appears to be beneficial to students' chances of success, and all the more so for students who face academic deficiencies" (p. 726), suggesting that advisors remain an important institutional information resource. This study gives some indication of how students feel about the advising process and whether they perceive an existence of an "information dump."

In addition to the informational burdens they face, community college students are more likely to be first generation college students, making it less likely that they can rely on parental guidance in navigating these structures. First-generation community college students have been found to work more, study less, complete fewer credit hours, and have lower grades than community college student peers whose parents both possessed bachelor's degrees (Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003, p. 425). There may also be more complex cultural differences between first-generation students and their peers. Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson and Covarrubius (2012) suggest that "the independent cultural norms institutionalized in American university settings can

undermine first-generation students' performance because they do not match the relatively interdependent norms to which many first-generation students are regularly exposed in their local working-class contexts prior to college" (p. 1192). This research suggests that such a "cultural mismatch" is detrimental to first-generation students. Although their research was conducted in four-year universities, where independence might be privileged more than at the community college setting, the first-generation college students norms of behavior may well be at odds with institutional expectations, even at the two-year level.

**Community college responses.** The idea that college information poses a challenge for many community college students is not lost on the community college sector, either in research or in practice. Morest (2013) reasons that community colleges are more likely to adjust their practices to meet student need than their four-year counterparts:

Since attending college is voluntary (as opposed to K-12 which is mandatory), the focus of researchers in higher education has been on the individual more so than the institution. However, this is less true of community colleges research which places relatively greater emphasis on organizational issues (p. 326).

Institutions have developed a variety of ways to try to lessen the need for specialized knowledge, to better connect students to information, or to develop students' abilities to seek answers to their questions. Interventions such as student success courses, streamlined enrollment procedures, and learning communities are emblematic of the types of ways community colleges have worked to address student information needs.

O'Gara, Karp, and Hughes (2009) conducted a qualitative study of community college students enrolled in student success courses to gain a better understanding of how these courses benefit students. They found that student success courses help students develop a level of comfort with the college. "In order to benefit from support services, students need to actually use them, not just know about them. This means that students need to know how to access a service and feel comfortable doing so" (p. 210). They found that this habituation transcended the course and helped to create a new mindset in the students whom they interviewed, suggesting "through their feeling of assimilation, students feel comfortable making contact with even more people such as classmates, staff members, and faculty members, which increased the amount of information they were able to access" (p. 212). Other studies (Montgomery, Jeffs, Schlegel, & Jones, 2009; Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007) have also pointed to the benefits of student success courses as a way of mediating students' access to institutional resources that they may not seek out on their own.

Rather than provide information to students via student success courses and other orientation initiatives, other models attempt to lessen the need for specialized information in the first place. Jenkins (2006) reasons, "while administrators may see different functional areas of the college as providing discrete services, students do not see, nor should they experience, such divisions" (p. 41). Since the University of Delaware adopted the model in 1993, the "one-stop shop" approach to delivering student services such as registration, financial aid, and bursar functions has expanded to other colleges, including community colleges. One case study of such a model describes the need to

“create a process that is welcoming, clear, and consistent in its goals and systems for its student body” (Walters, 2003, p. 51). Such an approach can also reduce unnecessary know-how, such as distinguishing between a bursar's and a financial aid office, neither of which first-time college students would have encountered in high school.

Learning communities typically consist of a group of students taking two or more courses together, although the intensity of this connection varies greatly. At the community college level, learning communities are often used to pair a developmental course with a credit-bearing college-level course (Barnes & Piland, 2010-2011). In their study of learning communities at community colleges, Wathington, Pretlow, and Mitchell (2010-2011) highlight the ability of cohorts to support not only students' academic success, but also their ability to connect with other students, faculty members, and, through these relationships, college resources. They note that “the relationships these students form with both other students and faculty can help increase their support networks and strengthen their ties to the institution” (p. 226). Although the research on the academic and enrollment effectiveness of learning communities remains largely inconclusive, the information networks that these structures provide may present an opportunity for further research.

The literature review served to provide background to the multiple missions of the community college, the information problems faced by community college students, and the efforts of the community college sector to address these information needs. Next, I will turn to a description of some of the theoretical work on community college persistence. Although testing theory is not the purpose of this study, the theoretical

framework can guide the direction of the research. Existing theory also underlines the importance of the topic of information problems in the community college setting.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on two theoretical frameworks in the formulation of the research questions and study design. Tinto's integration theory of college student persistence will highlight how improved information networks may improve students' integration with an institution and, therefore, their chances of persistence. The other framework to be employed, Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and social capital, describes how community college students, particularly those from disadvantaged or first-generation backgrounds, are not imbued with the same non-economic resources as students from more advantaged backgrounds. Rather than perceive this lack of information as a personal deficit, Bourdieu's theory maintains that certain informational resources, including the "college knowledge" that is the focus of this study, are used in the reproduction of social structures. Both of these theoretical perspectives draw attention to the importance of college information as a resource in its own right.

**Community college student persistence.** The most widely adopted theory of college student persistence is Tinto's (1993, 2009) theory of academic and social integration, which explains student persistence as the ability to adapt on a social level, by becoming involved in campus, and in the academic sphere, by realizing academic success. Most of the social and academic integration research was conducted in

residential, four-year colleges, calling into question the applicability of the theory to a two-year, commuter population.

Attempts to determine the relationship between social integration and student retention in the community college have been plagued by methodological issues. Several studies that found no or only slight relation (Bers & Smith, 1991; Borlum & Kubala, 2000) were primarily based on student-surveys that focused on satisfaction with academic and social climate; more problematic was the use of formal social activities, such as college-sponsored athletics, clubs, workshops, and cultural activities, as indicators of social engagement. Karp et al. (2011) stress the need to rethink the academic and social spheres as separate, as "these two do not appear to be analytically distinct" (p. 83) for the community college students in their sample. Deil-Amen (2005) comes to a similar conclusion, stating "the nature of the academic influence appears highly coupled with social integration, which suggests that it may not be plausible to think of academic and social integration as distinct concepts when applied to two-year college students" (p. 17). If the academic and social are intertwined, what is the implication for the effect of information on integration?

**Academic and social integration.** There are many studies of four-year institutions showing a relationship between social integration and persistence. However, these studies have not sufficiently "proved that socially integrating students into a campus

works to retain them" (Goldrick-Rab, 2007, p. 2472). This theory has also been applied to community colleges, with mixed results.

The integration theory has also been critiqued because of its requirement that students must effectively leave behind their former community in order to become fully integrated in the college environment (Kuh & Love, 2000; Tierney, 1999; Tierney, 2000). In the community college setting, many successful students do not become fully integrated into the institution; rather, they find ways to maintain their cultural connections and identity and are able to use this foundation as a supportive basis for their academic life. "The assumption that a ritual of transition is necessary for students to succeed is rejected in favor of activities that affirm the identities, homes, and communities in which individuals live and grow" (Tierney, 2000, p. 220). Overemphasizing the need to integrate in a foreign academic culture runs the danger of disregarding the importance of students' familial and neighborhood ties.

When the integration framework was first examined in relation to community colleges, researchers felt that students' commuter status precluded the academic and social integration that Tinto asserts as key for retention in the four-year college setting. The vast majority of community colleges are not residential; students are more likely to work while taking classes and are more likely to be part-time students. Measures of academic and social integration used in four-year settings, such as participation in extracurricular activities or meetings with instructors outside of class, may not adequately describe how community college students form a sense of connection with their campuses. Several recent studies, however, suggest that social integration may be

predictive of retention in the community college context, but the measure of this integration may differ. For example, Tinto's framework emphasizes student involvement in student-led clubs and extracurricular activities. In the community college setting, social and academic integration may occur in the form of informal study groups.

Since community college students spend most of their time on campus in the classroom, Barnett (2011) studied the effect of faculty validation on student persistence. Barnett (2011) operationalizes faculty validation behaviors as students being known and valued, appreciation for diversity, caring instruction, and mentoring. These practices were found to have a mediating effect on students' academic integration, which were correlated with persistence. This research echoes other studies that suggest that academic and social integration may very well be relevant in the community college setting, but may exert themselves through different channels.

One of the key points raised in the recent studies that support the application of Tinto's model in community colleges is the importance of information networks. Karp and Hughes (2008) found that being socially involved in and of itself was not sufficient for integration. They argue that information transfer may be a key element of social integration; students who had information networks consisting of peers, faculty members, or advisors were more integrated with the institution than students whose social interactions did not transmit college knowledge. This study explores this possible connection and furthers our understanding of how socially-mediated information might improve students' integration with the college.

**Beyond social and academic integration.** Several recent studies have suggested that the integration framework may be applicable in to community colleges, but it may exert itself in a different manner than on four-year, residential campuses. Karp et al. (2011) found that, in the community college setting, academic and social integration may overlap. The relationships that are the most valuable in holding students to the institution are those that transmit helpful and timely information. In the two-year college setting, where students are more likely to have families and work more hours, they are less likely to experience the strong identity shift to "college student" that accompanies Tinto's academic and social integration framework. Purely social relationships or participation in student clubs and organizations do not carry the same "sticking power" on a community college campus.

Karp et al. (2011) observe that students' information networks are closely related to both social and academic integration. They notice that "relationships predicated on information exchange appear to lead to stronger social connections than others" (p. 78) and "students who were part of information networks gained high quality information about courses and felt more attached to the college" (p. 79). In her qualitative study of a community college in the mid-Atlantic, Heverly (1999) found that "students who report that information is not readily available, that offices are not helpful, or that policies are not reasonable are likely to feel alienated from the institution" (p. 10), suggesting that information networks can work both ways, either as integrating or alienating forces.

It is important to note that social integration goes beyond just having people to say hello to in the hallways or being a member of a campus club. Karp et al. (2011) found

that it was not social interaction alone that made the difference, but specific types of relationships, particularly those that mediated helpful information. "Interestingly, networks that were created outside of the classroom - which were therefore focused more on the social aspect of college than on providing information about academics - did not seem to serve this purpose [creating a sense of belonging and attachment that seems to encourage persistence]" (p. 82). The relationships that mattered were those that afforded students the opportunity to converse as a college student, with questions and concerns attached to this emerging identity.

A similar pattern has also been shown among high school students, where academic and college discussions encourage college attendance among first-generation college students (Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000). Choy et al. (2000) found evidence that "if most or all of their friends had college plans, the odds of moderate- to high-risk students enrolling in college were four times higher than if none of their friends planned to go to college" (p. 53) and "the odds of enrolling in college were almost twice as great for students whose parents frequently discussed school-related matters with them as for those whose parents had little or no discussion with them" (p. 53). However, further research is needed to better understand the role of peers and parents in community college students' information networks *after* enrollment. This study helps to make that connection.

Integration into information networks may be even more critical in the remedial student population. In a comparison of remedial classes at a community college and research university, researchers found that it is the "curriculum, pedagogy, and level of

resources afforded to students by the institution that influence students' experiences with remediation" (Callahan & Chumney, 2009, p. 1620). They observed that the remedial students at the research university were more successfully connected to institutional resources, such as the campus writing center, and were therefore empowered to use these resources on their own, rather than relying on the faculty member. First-year experience or student success courses may play a similar role at the community college.

In his study of student peer relations at community colleges, W. Maxwell (2000) found that community college student engagement with college activities such as student clubs was very low, as seems logical. However, the majority of students in his survey (55%) studied together at least occasionally (p. 213), which is also a form of social engagement, albeit more informal. This type of combined academic and social engagement with peers seems to have a positive effect in Deil-Amen's (2005) research, where "with the exception of college GPA, [study groups are] the one within-college behavior with the strongest association with persistence, but only for the community college sample" (p. 17). In examining the information networks of students in my study, I gathered information about the role of peers and the formation of informal information networks that students might use to their advantage.

The role of information in community college student persistence is only beginning to be understood. Information can be seen as a key medium that is transferred under Tinto's academic and social integration model. However, information can also be understood as a form of capital, specifically cultural capital, as described by Bourdieu. This informational capital or cultural capital theory may help to illuminate the power

differentials that exist on the community college campus more completely than a modification of Tinto's theory to this setting.

**Bourdieu's cultural capital.** French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, cultural and social capital, and field have been widely used in the study of educational systems around the world, with a variety of foci, interpretations, and applications (Horvat, 2001; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Developed by Bourdieu in the 1960s through both theoretical and empirical work (Robbins, 2008), these four concepts break down the traditional dichotomy of individual agency and social structure and show how these two explanatory phenomena create one another in a dialectical fashion. Furthermore, never shying away from the political, Bourdieu uses the intersections of field, habitus, and capitals to show how those who inhabit the ruling class maintain their positions in power.

Bourdieu's concepts of social and cultural capital extend the traditional notion of capital as a purely economic resource to incorporate the immaterial. In this way, social and cultural capital can both be seen as forms of "symbolic capital" (Moore, 2008, p. 103). Symbolic capital in and of itself often has no economic value. In addition, in its inert state and out of context, it cannot be exchanged for economic (or other) capital. The value of any type of cultural or social capital is determined by the context, or field, in which it exists. Just as one city's subway token does not have value outside of the context of that system (unless it can be exchanged; more on this later), cultural capital does not have intrinsic value.

Furthermore, possession of cultural capital does not automatically impart a benefit. The possessor must be able to effectively apply, or activate, his or her cultural capital in order to receive something in exchange. The ability to activate capital is part of Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which "acts as a web of perceptions regarding the possible and appropriate action to take in a particular setting and to achieve a particular goal" (Walpole et al., 2005, p. 329-330). These two principles of cultural capital (value within a field and inertness unless/until activated) are, unfortunately, often overlooked in educational research.

Bourdieu posits cultural capital as embodying three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. He describes embodied cultural capital as taking "the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (Bourdieu, 1986/1997, p. 47). Objectified cultural capital is seen in cultural artifacts such as books, artworks, and musical collections, while institutionalized cultural capital takes the form of degrees, positions, awards and other socially accepted certifications of achievement. In the case of college degrees, for instance, a diploma from a prestigious university would carry more socially valuable institutionalized cultural capital than a community college degree.

Embodied cultural capital is the most difficult of the three to measure, as the valued cultural capital depends on the dispositions of those in power and, therefore, differs depending on time and place. The embodied cultural capital that signals participation in the upper- or middle-class in the early twenty-first century United States may differ in substantive ways from the signals used (and measured by Bourdieu) in France in the mid- to late-twentieth century. Although they are intellectually distinct

concepts, embodied cultural capital is often intertwined with Bourdieu's definition of habitus. In shorthand, cultural capital can be seen as tacit knowledge, while habitus is the ability to take advantage of the tacit knowledge. For example, a community college student may be aware that developing a relationship with a supportive professor will garner her an important recommendation for a transfer college application (possessing informational capital), but her ability to implement this knowledge would depend on her habitus: her willingness and skills in communicating with and engaging the instructor. The information alone is only partially helpful to the student; it is necessary, but not sufficient.

Cultural capital has been studied under different definitions, some relying more on Bourdieu's implementation of the term in his own research, others drawing more from his writings. Among earliest application of cultural capital in the American educational context, DiMaggio (1982) and DiMaggio and Mohr (1985) define cultural capital as "interest in and experience with prestigious cultural resources" (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985, p. 1233). Seeking to expand the potential of cultural capital and embed its larger social purpose in their definition, Lamont and Lareau (1988) describe it as "institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion" (p. 156). Later Lareau (with Weininger, 2003) de-emphasized the "high status cultural signals" in favor of "micro-interactional processes whereby individuals' strategic use of knowledge, skills, and competence come into contact with institutionalized standards of evaluation" (p. 597).

A key component of Bourdieu's work, and of the inter-workings of habitus, field and capitals, in particular, is the way in which he gives equal weight to social structure and individual agency. Too much emphasis on social structure and his viewpoint becomes overly deterministic; ascribing too much freedom to the individual and the theory does not sufficiently account for the power of social forces. Cultural capital, unlike economic or social capital, can be transferred almost invisibly. Transfer of economic capital via inheritance or social capital through nepotism are unlikely means of social mobility for most Americans. Cultural capital, under the guise of meritocracy, is seen as accessible to all. Since it could be argued that higher educational researchers are more interested in social mobility via education than in the ways in which the educational system furthers class domination, it is not surprising that much of the research employing Bourdieu's concepts have focused on ways to "make up for" the lack of social or cultural capital in certain underprivileged populations. However, simply "allowing or assisting a few students through the obstacle course of college access obscures the systemic imbalance where some students do not have an obstacle course" (Musoba & Baez, 2009, p. 174).

**Cultural capital in education research.** Previous applications of cultural capital in education research are varied not only in context (elementary, secondary, post-secondary, or graduate education), but also in how cultural capital is operationalized. To better understand the potential relevance of cultural capital to the community college population, it is helpful to review the previous measurement techniques used and the sites and populations where it has been studied. I will start with a discussion of the multitude

of ways in which cultural capital has been constructed and measured and then move to educational contexts.

*Issues of operationalization.* Finding indicators for cultural capital is difficult for a number of reasons. First, since cultural capital is not typically a material possession, it is not immediately apparent, even to its possessors. This makes cultural capital difficult to quantify. Secondly, as discussed previously, the value of any particular form of cultural capital depends on the field; what constitutes valued capital changes over time and across place. Lastly, in order to maintain the social hierarchy under the guise of meritocracy, cultural capital is often disguised as human capital (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). What may be largely considered objective measures of intellectual ability, such as the SATs, may require additional, culturally transmitted information, such as knowledge of the scores' importance in college admissions (Walpole et al., 2005).

In the studies relying on large data sets to examine the role of cultural capital, the possible means of measurement are constrained by the available data, a limitation that researchers generally acknowledge, making the indicators of cultural capital less than ideal. Because cultural capital value is attached to a specific field, "promising empirical analysis of Bourdieu's theories attend to local sites, even if they come at the expense of easy measurement" (Musoba & Baez, 2009, p.178). In addition, qualitative studies have a better chance of being able to tease out the workings of cultural capital, which are, by their very nature, invisible.

In early applications of cultural capital in the educational context, DiMaggio (1982) and DiMaggio and Mohr (1985) based their studies on Bourdieu's own methods of

measurement of cultural capital in France and, thus, continued to use indicators of highbrow arts participation as their proxies for cultural capital. Several researchers (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Jaeger, 2009; Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 1996; Sullivan, 2001) have continued in this vein. Critics of this type of operationalization of cultural capital, however, do not see such measures as being as relevant as they were in Bourdieu's French context (Kingston, 2001; Musoba & Baez, 2009; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Reay, 2004).

Researchers also vary in their decision to situate studies of cultural capital within Bourdieu's larger framework of habitus and field. In her excellent review of the extant cultural capital research in education, Winkle-Wagner (2010) categorizes cultural capital research into four general areas: highbrow cultural capital, "otherized" cultural capital, contextually-based cultural capital, and cultural capital in a Bourdieuan framework. Researchers working in the last two categories are sensitive to either the field in which the cultural capital transactions take place or the habitus displayed by the students under study.

Adopting this "Bourdieuian framework" (Winkle-Wagner, 2010), Lareau and Weininger (2003) assert that cultural capital and academic skills or abilities are not distinct concepts and that they are, in fact, "irrevocably fused" (p. 580). They emphasize cultural capital as an understanding of the evaluative context of the education system; parents need to know that there is a distinct advantage to advocating that their child be in a gifted program, as in the authors' example, or that SAT scores are important for the college application process and, therefore, warrant specialized tutoring (Walpole et al., 2005). In these two cases, the parents need to be aware of particular abilities that are

valued by the field. From this position, SAT scores and grades are not purely a measurement of academic ability; there is an aspect of cultural capital that plays a role in these assessments. Students must realize that the tests are valued and then they must prepare themselves to perform (know what to prepare for; know how to best prepare, etc.). Reay (2004) similarly calls "for a broad understanding of cultural capital, one that focuses on qualitative dimensions of cultural capital as well as the measurable, and emphasizes 'the affective aspects of inequality' such as levels of confidence and entitlement" (p. 75). Despite being open access institutions, community colleges are rife with examples of services that benefit students who possess not only awareness of them, but also the "confidence and entitlement" to take advantage of them.

*Educational contexts.* Previous studies examining the role of cultural capital in higher education have focused primarily on transitions to college. There is a significant body of literature examining how privileged families transmit the types of cultural and social capital and the corresponding habitus that is valued by universities, thereby maintaining social stratification (Bloom, 2007; Devine, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Nora, 2004; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005; Tierney, 2009; Tierney & Venegas, 2009; Walpole et al., 2005; Zeidner, 2006). This work is largely explanatory, describing how class mediates access to important forms of cultural capital, such as financial aid information (Tierney & Venegas, 2009; Zeidner, 2006), academic preparation expectations (Devine, 2004; Zeidner, 2006) and knowledge about the importance of SAT scores (Walpole et al., 2005) and how habitus often determines where students apply (McDonough, 1997; Nora, 2004) or whether or not college attendance is even considered as a possibility (Bloom, 2007;

Tierney, 2009). These studies have all contributed to our understanding of how and why students obtain the privileged cultural capital necessary to make these transitions, particularly in schools where the cultural capital required is less likely to be found in the students' homes. This literature has also shown that students have different expectations regarding the type of help from parents in the college transition process. While middle-class high school students describe their parents' role in the college search process as "simply what parents do" (Bloom, 2007, p. 362), poor and working-class students took it for granted that this was a task that they were supposed to complete on their own, "expecting little in the way of assistance" (Bloom, 2007, p. 362).

When parents do intervene in their children's school lives, as in Lareau and Horvat's (1999) study of family-school relationships, they are more successful when their behavior falls under teachers' definition of appropriate parental involvement. The middle-class parents took a firm, but soft approach when intervening for their children and were able to secure placement in a gifted program, for example. The poor and working-class parents, on the other hand, were either completely deferential, which made them appear to teachers as indifferent, or were vocal and antagonistic; neither technique afforded their children the additional benefits that the middle-class children, already privileged in many ways, received.

There are important implications from this work for applications of cultural capital and habitus in the community college setting. First, the measures used as proxies for cultural capital are primarily informational, such as knowledge about the existence of various types of, and the skills needed to apply for, financial aid and understanding the

importance of SAT scores and techniques for improving these scores. Secondly, cultural capital in the form of these types of knowledge and skills is necessary, but not sufficient for successful college attendance. In order to take advantage of this knowledge, students also need the corresponding habitus in order to be able to activate their capital by submitting applications, taking the SATs, and making plans to attend college. Most middle- and upper-class students never actually make a decision to attend college (Tierney & Venegas, 2009; Nora, 2004). Their college-going habitus was developed over time, shaped by parental expectations (Devine, 2004) and the way in which their high schools were geared (McDonough, 1997). Berger (2000) suggests that there is a college-persisting habitus. Just as middle-and upper-class students do not necessarily make a decision to go to college, it never occurs to them that dropping out is even a possibility.

**Community colleges, institutional structures, and cultural capital.** The importance of cultural capital in the community college environment is made more pronounced not only because of students' initial lack of valued cultural capital, but also due to the nature of the field (community college structure) and the relative inability of community college students to seek out and then to activate cultural capital. In order to take advantage of Bourdieu's full framework, we must expand out from an increasingly "deficit" model of describing students' lack of dominantly prized cultural capital to also include institutional structures that reduce the need for this type of cultural capital (or place more value on the types of cultural capital that students have).

Berger (2000) hypothesizes that students who possess more valued cultural capital will tend to persist no matter what the institutional level of cultural capital (p. 114). This

is supported by Wells' (2009) finding that, across all ethnic and racial groups, students with lower amounts of cultural and social capital were less likely to persist than students with higher amounts of these capitals. Berger (2000) also suggests that students are more likely to persist in institutions with similar levels or types of cultural capital as their own. His hypothesis is supported by Wells' (2008) examination of the role of social and cultural capital in the persistence of community college students, suggesting that community colleges may be more meritocratic. Students with lower levels of traditional cultural and social capital so valued by four-year institutions were more likely to make the transition from their first to their second year than similar students beginning at those four-year schools.

This is not to suggest that community colleges as institutions do not require similar kinds of cultural capital as their four-year counterparts; they do. Berger (2000) asserts that all institutions of higher education, including community colleges, have become "more congruent with the habitus and entitlement expectations of students with access to higher levels of cultural capital" (p. 114-5). Community colleges may even require a different type of specialized knowledge because of their multiple missions and open access philosophy described earlier. The institutional structure can be a maze of students, with the sheer number of course offerings, each carrying varying types of credit and counting toward different degrees. Some courses, such as remedial courses, bear credit for financial aid, but are not part of degree programs. It is not surprising, then, that Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2002) found significant confusion in their survey of

community college remedial students, where 73% did not know if or wrongly assumed that their developmental courses carried course credit (p. 262).

Cultural capital exchanges have been described as "micro-interactional processes" (Lareau & Weininger, 2003) and "moments of inclusion and exclusion" (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). These "moments" in and of themselves are easily overlooked, but "micro-interactions" can quickly add up. "Many two-year students are marginal in that they are so tenuous in their college student role that seemingly minor setbacks are not interpreted as such and could easily throw them off course and back into a re-adoption of a non-college student identity" (Deil-Amen, 2011, p. 78). Since community college students are less likely to possess a habitus of college completion that propels middle-class university students over seemingly minor hurdles, even small gaps in information may be more detrimental to the community college student.

The burden of acquiring privileged cultural capital is often placed on the student, the idea being that if we could simply give students information, they would be able to enter and persist in higher education and achieve the same outcomes as their cultural capital wealthy peers. "Although 'piling on information' may have benefits, it assumes that students have time for additional reading and meetings, that students can understand a plethora of complex information, and that students realize that they have information problems" (Person et al., 2006, p. 384). Additionally, giving capital to students does not mean that they will be able to activate this capital. Another approach would be to take a closer look at institutional processes and procedures that require specialized information and adapt them in such a way to reduce the need for this "know-how" in the first place.

Therefore, the cultural capital necessary to successfully navigate community colleges may be more aptly labeled "informational capital." In an interview with Wacquant, Bourdieu (1992) said of cultural capital, "we should in fact call [it], *informational capital*" (p. 119), bringing to light the importance of system-valued, procedural knowledge as capital in its own right.

**Cultural capital as informational capital.** The term *informational capital* implies a broader scope than cultural capital, focusing on what kind of knowledge is implicitly valued, whether it "high culture," as it was in Bourdieu's field of study or not. Still, the forms that informational capital assumes are just as likely to be arbitrary and imbued with power. In his challenge to the previous use of cultural capital concepts in educational research, Kingston (2001) takes issue with the growing scope of what could be considered cultural capital. He is particularly troubled by measures that verge on assessments of academic or intellectual ability as indicators of cultural capital. In their response, Lareau and Weininger (2003) claim that cultural capital can overlap intellectual measures. In an era of an increased emphasis on educational testing in the United States, the knowledge of navigating these measurements is an important piece of cultural capital for the middle and upper classes. While SAT scores may not be a direct indicator of informational capital, knowledge about the importance of the test, tools available to prepare for it, and ways of approaching the SAT and ACT are, indeed, forms of

informational capital (Walpole et al., 2005). These tests will continue to play a part in admissions as long as they favor those in power.

There is an interesting body of research on knowledge of financial aid that is especially pertinent to a discussion of informational capital. Zeidner (2006) questions, “is it merely that the lack of ability to pay for college is the source for the growing gap between low-income people and others, or is lack of information regarding financial aid programs and/or understanding of how to apply for such aid the root cause?” (p. 123). Students also need to know that sufficient academic preparation is key not only to college acceptance and success, but also to access financial aid, as, increasingly, even need-based grants have a merit component. Tierney and Venegas (2009) describe this information gap as another barrier to students: “It is unclear whether these two pools – those students who are not academically eligible and those who are not taking advantage of the program – are receiving the information they need to make informed decisions about their college-going careers” (p. 379).

In their comparison of remedial writing courses at a community college and public university, Callahan and Chumney (2009) found that the community college instructor was not as effective in developing students' cultural capital, describing that it was "students' access (or lack of access) to particular resources or capital - course content that developed analytic skills, access to a full-time professor, and one-on-one tutoring - that stratified the students in our study" (Callahan & Chumney, 2009, p. 1661). This type of "college knowledge," availability of tutoring and developing the habitus necessary to engage in help-seeking behavior, is critical for persistence.

At the four-year level, Collier and Morgan (2007) identify a mismatch between faculty expectations and students' understandings of assignments in their study of first-generation students. While the faculty members felt that their expectations were clear, they did not realize how much information they needed to make explicit to their students and in what form in order to help the students meet their expectations. The authors identify cultural capital needs operating within the classroom itself, suggesting that "success in college depends not only on upon their [the students'] explicit understanding of course content but also their implicit understanding of how to demonstrate that knowledge in ways that will satisfy each professor's expectations" (Collier & Morgan, 2007, p. 428). First-generation students were often unaware of where to look for guidelines regarding assignments or attendance or, when they found the information, they found it difficult to interpret and put into practice. Since the bulk of what little time community college students spend on campus is in the classroom, it would be worth getting a better picture of student perceptions regarding academic expectations and their own abilities to meet them.

Farkas, Grobe, Sheehan, and Shuan (1990) also use informal academic standards, this time in a middle-school setting, as a stand-in for cultural capital. They show a correlation between teachers' perceptions of students' work habits and grading practices: "teacher judgments of student noncognitive characteristics are powerful determinants of course grades, even when student cognitive performance is controlled" (Farkas et al., 1990, p. 140). Cues such as classroom behavior are culturally based, requiring not only

the information of due dates and instructor expectations, but also the associated habitus in order to present this knowledge in a way that is valued by the teacher.

This kind of individualism may be culturally at odds with student's upbringing. "By speaking out in class and working independently to attain high grades, students must do things that prior to this point in their lives they learned were wrong" (Kuh & Love, 2000, p. 204). Such an emphasis on solitary, individual achievement can also push students away from seeking out and accessing the social resources that they do have. "For nonprivileged children, [the emphasis on competition, self-sufficiency, autonomy, and meritocracy] acts to undermine the support flowing from family and community sources and muddles their awareness of how important help-seeking behavior, supportive ties to peers, and collaborative learning are to their long-term success" (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 31). Informational capital is an important construct contributing to this study, but social capital also has a role to play in students' ability to acquire and activate informational capital.

**Social capital.** Theories of information behavior and social resource theory may be useful in researchers' future examination of informational capital, particularly in the "moments" of transmission or conversion. Social networks can facilitate transfer of cultural capital and/or the community support needed for students to operate in both the home and the college systems. Savolainen's everyday life information seeking theory (Savolainen, 2005) and the body of work on social networks and social resources,

primarily led by Lin (1999, 2001), can aid researchers in examining Bourdieu's constructs at the micro-level.

Although not situated in Bourdieu's framework, Given's (2002) qualitative study of mature undergraduates' information behavior does illuminate the information needs of college students after admission, particularly the affective effect of information. She describes mature undergraduate information processing through the lens of everyday life information seeking (ELIS), a theory of information behavior developed by Savolainen and which is based on Bourdieu's idea of habitus. ELIS states that habitus will largely determine preferences for resources and information-seeking behavior. The way in which people respond to problems in their everyday life may differ depending on their habitus (Savolainen, 2005). In the case of the participants in Given's (2002) study, "information acquisition was central to the students' abilities to make personally meaningful life decisions" (p. 22). In providing information, social contacts also provided emotional support and prompted the students to switch from passive to active strategies of information seeking (Given, 2002, p. 22).

A discussion of social capital is beyond the scope of this chapter; however, aspects of Lin's social resources theory, which is, in part, based on Bourdieu's conceptualization of social capital, are relevant to an examination of informational capital in a social context. Lin defines social capital as "resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions" (Lin, 2001, p. 12). His social resources theory works with this definition to describe ways in which social networks afford access to social capital, which in turn has the potential to transmit informational

capital. Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) use Lin's work to illuminate the role of social capital in the transmission of information to Mexican-origin high school students. Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) aimed to uncover if students from different language and class backgrounds were more or less successful in connecting to institutional agents (defined as teachers, counselors and other school staff, but also middle-class friends), who could potentially link the students "with useful information about opportunities and choices otherwise not available" (Lin, 2001, p. 6-7). While their findings were largely inconclusive, the study opened a promising avenue of research into information networks and social capital.

There are several concerns implicit in attempting to develop cultural capital via institutional agents. Bourdieu (1986/1997) stresses that acquiring cultural capital, especially in its embodied form, requires time; institutional agents may not necessarily have the time to discuss with students the implications of the information that they transmit. Ahn (2010) warns that not all institutional agents are created equal. Each mentor "possess[es] variable access to other individuals and sources of college-knowledge information" (Ahn, 2010, p. 18). To further complicate matters, the effectiveness of institutional agents "depends on and interplays with the predominant information culture and communicative environment of the social network(s)" (Widén-Wulff et al., 2008, p. 347). In other words, how receptive students and their families are to information from "outside."

In their conceptual model of information behavior and social capital, Widén-Wulff et al. (2008) posit that social opportunities are most easily acquired by balancing a

connection with one's community with a willingness or ability to acquire information from those external to the community. In other words, opportunity is best for those who have a close social network providing trust and support, but who also exhibit "extrovert information behavior," developing social connections outside of the community. "They [strong ties], by definition, represent commitment, trust, and obligation and, therefore, the motivation to help. Willingness and effort to search other ties by these strong ties may be critical under institutional uncertainties or constraints" (Lin, 1999, p. 482-483). The intersection of social networks and information can be very informative to furthering understanding of the ways in which informational capital is accessed and activated in an educational context.

### **Conclusion**

This literature review served to outline the context of community colleges in the United States and the complexity of processes and requirements that students must navigate if they are to successfully accomplish their educational goals. According to recent research, Tinto's academic and social integration model may be more closely tied to information transmission in the community college sector than in a four-year context. Other researchers have found traction in Bourdieu's framework of field, habitus, and capital to describe the role of micro interactions involving privileged "know-how," or cultural capital, in student persistence. Both theories point to information needs of community college students as important to our understanding of student persistence in this context. This study directly addresses this gap in the literature.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES**

In this section, I present the rationale for the use of a qualitative case study to examine student college information behavior. I assess my suitability as a researcher to undertake this particular study and describe my personal and professional interests in this topic. Next, I describe the sampling method and interview respondents for the study and how these have been selected as suitable for illuminating the research questions. After providing this context, I describe the data collection and data analysis methods that were used. I then identify threats to validity, as well as how I mitigated their effects. Finally, I discuss how I handled ethical issues that arose in the course of this research.

#### **Assumptions and Rationale**

In order to gain a better understanding of how community college students access and use college information, I employed a qualitative case study method. Studies of information behavior lend themselves to qualitative research methodologies and to case studies in particular. Yin (2009) describes the case study method as an inquiry that "investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 18). In this vein, I aimed to describe students' information seeking as it exists in the context of their social networks and educational environment, without treatment or intervention.

The context of this case study is especially significant as information seeking behavior is deeply embedded in the environment. Information resources could be

documents, such as websites or the college catalog, or people, including friends, family members, other students, professors, or advisors. Institutional culture also shapes how its members seek information. A larger context, comprised of students' off-campus relationships and outside sources of information, undoubtedly also affects students' information seeking behavior. I was interested in how students perceive and use the information available to them. A simple survey of students would not have answered the questions posed in this study.

While my research design is based on Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and Tinto's integration framework, the goal of the case study was not to explicitly test these framing theories. I approached this case study analytically, collecting thick description to be used "to illustrate, support, or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to the data gathering" (Merriam, 1998, p. 38). The purpose of the study was to develop a better picture of how students at one institution are navigating college systems. While an underlying or future goal may be to improve students' information seeking abilities or to redesign information systems in order to reduce students' need for information, this case study serves only to provide insight and to lay the groundwork for possible intervention.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As a full-time employee of the college acting as the study site, I am familiar with the processes and procedures for entering students, the information resources available to them, and the support services and personnel who are able to assist them. My placement in the institution helped me to design an interview protocol that is sensitive to the context and to interpret data in light of this understanding. In my position as a library

administrator, I do not have authority over students; I am not an advisor, nor am I responsible for grading. I am also not in a decision making role that would affect college information resources or processes, nor did I have any role in the current systems and resources that are in place. I feel that I was in an ideal position for researching how students access information resources because I was knowledgeable about the processes at the college and information seeking behavior in general, but not under any pressure to either criticize or praise institutional procedures or resources.

I came to this dissertation topic through a combination of intellectual curiosity, professional interests, and a personal calling. I have long been interested in how people recognize information needs and how information is socially mediated. Although I did not attend a community college, I am a first-generation college student, so I actively sought out most of my own college information alone. In my work, however, I meet community college students who struggle with the system. As I help them understand their academic plan program, fill out a FAFSA application, or register for courses online, I see first-hand their confusion and frustration. I have noticed in these encounters that, rather than point out faults in the design of information sources, students tend to interpret their inability to successfully use this information as personal failure.

When I first started my master's program in information, I studied human-computer interaction. There is a large and growing body of applied research on designing systems to be easier to use and more intuitive. We see the advantages of this research in the design of large travel websites, online retailers and social networks, even car dashboards and washing machines. Where profit is to be made, usability has become a

priority; yet, this same consideration has not transferred to over to the systems that our community college students need to navigate college. These barriers to information access, especially for those who most need the information, are personally very troubling to me. Information is power and, as such, plays a role in maintaining the social status quo. My career choice as a librarian and my decision to practice at the community college level both stem from these social justice concerns.

I have ten years of experience as a librarian working with college students, assisting them in finding, evaluating, and using information resources. In this role, I have become skilled at gleaning students' information needs even when they cannot accurately express them. Perhaps more importantly, I am usually able to quickly establish a level of comfort and trust with the students whom I assist. I feel my sensitivity to data in the form of descriptions from students improved this study. In the next section, I discuss how I selected the group of students who were interviewed.

### **Population and Sample**

This case study focused on 15 full-time, first-time students enrolled in at least one remedial course at a suburban, mid-Atlantic, transfer-oriented community college over the course of one year. This case is not meant to be representative, nor was it chosen as an outlier or special case. While it would be possible to gain insight to information seeking strategies of community college students by sampling from the entire population of students over multiple institutions, I chose to randomly select developmental mathematics and English courses from which to purposefully sample 15 student

participants for this study. In this section, I describe the site, using a pseudonym for the name of the college, and my rationale for selecting participants in this way.

Mayfair Community College (MCC) is located in the suburbs of a mid-Atlantic city. It is a selection of convenience, but this institution is not markedly different from other suburban community colleges in the region. While this site selection is not meant to be representative of all suburban community colleges, it is also not a special case.

Conducting this case study at one institution as a bounded case aided in data analysis, as each of the students are operating in the same institutional structure, with common formal sources of information (college website and course catalog) and common processes (students take a placement test before they are able to register for classes). Each student has a unique background and her own personality; comparing how these different individuals react to and navigate a similar structure allowed for comparisons among the students.

Within MCC, I randomly selected 12 remedial math and English sections from the course schedule by assigning each section a number and using a random number generator to choose 12 sections. I have chosen remedial students as interview participants because remedial students face an added layer of information needs, namely, information about the non-credit nature of remedial courses themselves, as well as the increased time to degree that students may face as a result of being placed into remedial courses. I emailed the instructors of the randomly selected sections to gain permission to visit the class one time to recruit students for the study. My rationale for selecting specific courses through which to obtain my interview sample is twofold: first, many entering students do

not use college email and those who do may be uncharacteristically connected to the institution. Students responding to flyers would likely be more extroverted and therefore might also be more active in their information seeking style. Since information access and awareness of communication resources, such as college email accounts, are the phenomena under study, such a contact method may have resulted in a skewed picture of the remedial student experience. Secondly, as noted in the literature review, classroom interactions are an important source of social and academic integration for community college students. Interviewing multiple students taking a common course offered another point of comparison among perceptions of the role of peers.

A qualifying survey [Appendix A] was used to identify first-time, full-time, non-minor students in the 12 sections. I selected first-time college students because they have not developed information seeking strategies at another college that they can use at MCC. Full-time students were chosen. Part-time students do not usually apply for or receive financial aid and these students can also choose to delay taking remedial coursework and, therefore, part-time students enrolled in remedial courses may be uncharacteristically motivated.

A total of 48 qualifying surveys were collected from the 12 randomly selected sections. I then created a stratified random sample of interview participants reflective of the site's demography. The qualifying survey asked students to self-describe both race and gender categories. All students self-identified as either male or female. I grouped students who self-identified as "black" or "African-American" into the same "African-American" category. Two students self-identifying as Hispanic set up interview

appointments, but neither attended. One was sick and was considering dropping his courses. I provided advice to the student and helped him connect to college supports. Since this intervention may have affected his perception of college information sources, I could not include the student. Table 1 shows the number of each student by race and gender. The study demographics roughly mirror those of the developmental courses in fall 2012. Based on the qualifying surveys that returned, the population of the College's developmental courses was more diverse than the College at large. Unfortunately, data regarding the demographics of developmental courses was not available. For the entire College at that time, approximately 57% of students were female and 42% were male; the sample was 53% female and 47% male. College-wide data shows 64% of students identify as Caucasian. White students comprise 60% of the students in this study.

Table 1				
<i>Interview participants by gender and race</i>				
<u>Interview</u>	<u>Female</u>		<u>Male</u>	
	<u>African-American</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>African-American</u>	<u>White</u>
First Interview	3	5	3	4
Second Interview	1	3	0	2

Ten of the fifteen students responded to my request for a second interview in the spring semester. Of these, two students responded that they were no longer enrolled. Seven set up appointments to be interviewed; one student missed her appointment and did not respond to follow-up contact, so a total of six second interviews were conducted in the spring; the race and gender of these participants is also reflected in Table 1.

## **Data Collection**

Students were interviewed about the various information sources they have used in the past, which ones they trust, and how they came to discover what information sources work for them. Since students encounter different types of college information at different times, while they are still in high school, when they decide to enroll, when they apply, when they take placement tests, and when they register for courses, I employed a semi-structured interview format, as it lends itself well to story-telling. This format "allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). Demographic information not covered by the qualifying survey, such as parents' occupation, was obtained in a more structured manner during the interview. The interview protocol is found in Appendix B.

Interviews were conducted with 15 students in November and early December of 2012. Follow-up interviews with six of these students were completed in late March and April of 2013. The primary aim of the first round of interviews was to gain insight on the first research question and its sub-questions, namely, how do community college students access information and how do they assess the reliability of this information? The second overarching research question (how do students make sense of the implications of college information?) required a second interview. Initially, students were asked to identify information sources that they used to apply to the college, enroll in courses, and identify academic support services that are available to them. In their first semester, however, they may not yet have encountered feedback that would alert them to misinformation. For

example, they may not realize until they register for courses in their second year that they will not complete an associate's degree in two years. The ramifications of incorrectly interpreted or false information are not always immediate and this study was designed to take that into consideration.

All initial interviews were conducted in one of two small, quiet, and comfortable conference rooms in the main academic building, which was recently renovated. I introduced myself as a Temple University student conducting research and that, in this role, I am not representing MCC. I used clear and conversational language. As J. Maxwell (2005) advises, I worked with these students in a partnership based on "trust, intimacy, and reciprocity" (p. 84). To establish this relationship, I began the first interview by asking the student to share his or her story of entering the community college. In asking the students to begin with a longer narrative, I hoped to establish trust by proving myself an empathic and interested listener. Two subjects were shy and required more prompting, but neither seemed uncomfortable with the interview. All interviews were recorded with the students' permission.

Prior to conducting the interviews, I examined formal information artifacts published by the college that students would be likely to encounter, such as the college catalog, website, and the student information management system. These documents provided context for the interview; I occasionally had students describe those information sources to me and this familiarity assisted in interpreting the students' use of those documents. Several students mentioned using documents and websites that I had not previously examined. Where possible, I sought these out to compare the information

given to the student's stated use. For example, one student mentioned that a nearby school offered a particular program. After the interview, I was able to look up that institution to verify or refute the student's information. Now that I have outlined the data collection for the study, I would like to describe how I analyzed the resulting data.

### **Data Analysis**

The average interview length was 45 minutes for the fall data collection and 22 minutes for the spring interviews. A total of 13 hours of audio files from interviews were sent to a professional transcription service for transcription via a secure uploading process. No identifying information was included in the audio files or file names. Upon return of the complete transcripts, I verified the transcription against the audio recordings and added observational notes taken during the interviews. These transcripts and observational notes were coded using the TAMSAalyzer coding software.

Approximately 100 codes were developed and applied to the transcripts. A listing of the codes used can be found in Appendix C. The codes were refined over three waves of analysis. The multiple passes through the data helped to insure both the integrity and the consistency of the coding. The codes captured sources of information, such as peers or advisors, as well as responses that indicated a source was not used or provided misinformation. Other codes highlighted strategies or areas where students may have experienced confusion and therefore may have benefited from more information. Demographic information including race, gender, and first-generation college student status, both collected in the qualifying survey (Appendix A) and during the interview, was also included in the coding to assist with analysis.

After the third wave of coding, a preliminary analysis of the data was conducted by comparing the information sources utilized by the students. The research questions that guided this study focused on the students' information use and not on the information sources themselves. Therefore, the analysis focused on characteristics of the students.

I employed a grounded theory method of interpreting data. The grounded theory method, first developed and described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), rejects the notion that themes emerging from the data can be tested against an extant hypothesis that is established prior to data collection. In their words, the constant comparative method "is concerned with generating and plausibly suggesting (but not provisionally testing) many categories, properties, and hypotheses about general problems" (p. 104). Rather, Glaser and Strauss (1967) argue for themes and substantive theory to stem from the data and be compared back to the data, in the constant comparative method.

Furthermore, I applied Charmaz's (2005) notion of constructivism as it applies to grounded theory. The constructivist stance "does not assume that data simply await discovery in an external world or that methodological procedures will correct limited views of the studied world. Nor does it assume that impartial observers enter the research scene without an interpretive frame of reference" (p. 509). In approaching data analysis, I see myself as an active participant in the construction of categories within the data. As Charmaz (2005) details, "no qualitative method rests on pure induction - the questions we ask of the empirical world frame what we know of it. In short, we share in constructing what we define as data" (p. 509). I share her viewpoint that a researcher interprets her data through her personal and theoretical perspectives; however, I also share her

conviction that acknowledging the role of the researcher does not detract from the empirical rigor of the constructivist grounded theory approach.

In utilizing a grounded theory approach, it was not the aim to test the theoretical frameworks that guided this research. The frameworks, particularly Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital served to emphasize the importance of information, particularly college information, in the field of higher education in the United States. The categories that emerged from the data analysis can be used to support the applicability of Bourdieu's cultural capital framework to this site. For example, concepts such as activation of cultural capital as discussed by Bourdieu were not directly coded for in the data, but, as I will discuss in the findings, students' ability to act on information was an important theme in the analysis.

As any with any qualitative research study, I brought a certain perspective to the data analysis informed by my experience and knowledge. My awareness of this perspective led to the use of certain methods of verification.

### **Methods of Verification**

There are several potential threats to validity that I needed to address and I employed a variety of methods to strengthen the overall validity of the study. Rather than simply list those methods here, I will acknowledge what I saw as specific potential threats and describe how I used these methods to address each one.

How did I know that students are accurately reporting all of their information sources? In this case, I used comparison to strengthen internal validity. The literature suggests that students rely on convenient, personal sources for information; therefore, I

could expect a similar preference in my population. I also triangulated the interview data with college documents and other information sources, which I used as a point of comparison with student reports of tapping into college sources.

How did I guard against a failure to correctly interpret student information behavior? As a full-time administrator at the interview site, I relied on my intensive, four year involvement with the institution to "help to rule out spurious associations and premature theories" (J. Maxwell, 2005, p. 110). I also utilized the technique of respondent validation to clarify students' responses when I felt necessary.

How did I increase validity of my coding and category formation? Interviews were semi-structured to allow participants to describe their information behavior in their own words. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Observational field notes were taken during and directly following interviews to aid in analysis. I sought out discrepant evidence in my data and actively tested my analysis against these negative cases.

### **Ethical Issues**

There is a potential for ethical dilemmas to arise in any study and I acted in good faith to avoid or resolve such dilemmas. In my role of researcher, I was not a source of information for the students in my study. In the course of describing their information gathering history, students expressed misunderstandings and confusion over college processes or policies. Since I followed up with these students in the spring, I withheld information and advice that could have been beneficial for them in order to preserve the integrity of the study. I was not directly asked for information in the course of the study.

Students were informed of the purpose of the study and all signed an informed consent form before the interviews commenced. Participants were permitted to decline to answer any questions and withdraw from the study at any time; none chose to do so.

I approached this study with full knowledge of my responsibilities as an ethical researcher, including the importance of maintaining the trust and confidentiality of my participants. All identifying data resulting from this research is kept in either a locked file cabinet or on a password-protected personal computer. Electronic data was not transferred via email or otherwise transmitted or stored online. I use pseudonyms in this dissertation and in any future publications that may result from this research.

### **Outcome of the Study and Relationship to Theory and Literature**

This study furthers our understanding of remedial students' access to and application of college information at one community college. As outlined in the literature review, previous research has pointed to the importance of social and academic integration, especially when mediated by participation in networks that connect participants to college information and know-how. This study builds on recent suggestions that, in the community college setting, social integration may be linked to information networks. This study illuminates how this process may occur at this particular site.

This study may provide direction in further adoption of a model of academic and social integration that is relevant to community colleges and their students. In examining how students access college information, we can get a better picture of both the influence of information on student planning and the types of resources students use, such as

college publications, college personnel, peers, and parents. These sources of information can be clues to the level of social integration of students. This study also adds to the literature on the role of information on student formation of educational aspirations. Previous work on this area has focused on "cooling out" or "warming up" of community college student degree aspirations, particularly in the context of student interaction with advisors or faculty members. Understanding how students perceive college information concerning their academic plans would add to the literature on the foundation of these aspirations.

While the ability to quantitatively demonstrate the retention power of student success courses or to measure the effects of academic or social integration are important in addressing the needs of community college students, this study does not attempt to test an intervention or program. It is my aim to illuminate how community college students access college information, whether mediated by the college or through more informal sources, and to investigate how this information, if attained, affects students' educational decisions.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

Considering the range of potential sources of information, from family members to college personnel to college documents such as course catalogs, students can string together many combinations of sources to set goals and judge their progress towards them. One of the benefits of using qualitative methods to examine student information seeking and use is being better able to understand this behavior in context. Although all students are enrolled at the same institution and only first-time, full-time students who placed into at least one remedial course were chosen to participate, the students have a variety of information needs and information gaps in different areas. Some arrive with a plan, but most are figuring it out as they go along.

The institutional environment and the students' relationship with it is an important factor in examining information behavior, since the students' level of comfort or trust in the school can alter information flow and use. How each student made the decision to attend the institution, how self-confident she is, and how she views her classmates can affect how she interprets information. I will begin this chapter by describing some shared characteristics of students, followed by an in-depth look at each of the four categories that emerged. Finally, I will go through the various types of information sources that surfaced in the study and discuss the ways each category of student interacted with that type of source.

As described in chapter three, the 15 interviews from the fall of 2012 and six interviews from spring of 2013 were transcribed and coded. Contextual codes include

work schedule, reason for attending the college, and comparison to high school. The bulk of the labels dealt with information sources and were nested to indicate both the type of information source and whether or not it was used. For example, students' descriptions of classmates as a source of information were coded *information>person>classmate>positive*, while responses where students indicated that they did not get information from their classmates were coded *information>person>classmate>negative*. In addition to information sources, other codes centered around strategies, confusion, and use of college resources. Passages describing a student's visit to the college's tutoring services were coded *college\_resources>uses*. If a college resource was not used, the reason was also embedded in the descriptor; reasons in this study included lack of time, a perception that the resource is not currently needed, and being unaware of the resource. Attitudes were also categorized, such as affective responses to other classmates and the required college orientation course. In the course of coding, some labels proved to be too general, so second and third readings and analyses of the data were conducted to tighten conceptual distinctions and improve consistency in the use of labels.

After the data was coded, the participants and codes were placed in a table to assist in the identification of patterns of information use, strategies, and attitudes. Initially, three categories of students emerged: those who were active in soliciting information from college and personal sources, those who expressed considerable confusion regarding college information and had not applied information to their stated career or educational goals, and those who fell in between, incorporating some

information as it came to them, but not actively seeking it. Several students were outliers; they did not actively seek information, but were on more secure footing than their peers. The outliers were examined for another commonality and a fourth category was formed. Next, I will describe the four categories, followed by an examination of the intersection of the categories with demographic characteristics of the students, such as race, gender, and first-generation college student status.

### **Description of Categories**

Categorizing students into groups is helpful in examining the various information sources that the students encountered because certain information sources were more powerful with some groups than with others. One group is highly effective at both gathering and applying information. I will label this group “the planners.” Another group struggles with both tasks; I’ll refer to these students as “the dreamers.” Most students fell in between, but there is a distinction to be made in this group between students who have what could be described as a personal navigator or well-defined path (labeled “the passengers”) and those who, while they may have a guide or receive information from the college, have to apply it alone with varying degrees of success (called “the drifters”).

Table 2 shows the common themes for students in each category. Note that the passengers share the characteristics of the drifters.

Table 2 <i>Distinguishing characteristics of dreamers, drifters, passengers, and planners</i>		
	<u>Passengers</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Has a personal guide to assist with navigating and applying information or</li> <li>▪ On a path that reduces the need for knowing and applying information</li> </ul>	<u>Planners</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Active in pursuing information related to plans</li> <li>▪ Evidence of strategy in career goal and educational plans (marketable, plays on strengths, etc.)</li> <li>▪ Exhibit comfort in acting independently</li> </ul>
<u>Dreamers</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Passive information collecting style</li> <li>▪ Career goal is uninformed and largely unconnected to stated educational goal</li> <li>▪ Does not recognize information needs</li> </ul>	<u>Drifters</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Passive information collecting style</li> <li>▪ Some evidence of strategy in career goal or educational plans</li> <li>▪ Knows there is information that is needed, but does not proactively seek it</li> </ul>	

It's important to point out that these categories deal with information and advice more so than support. Several students have very supportive parents or family members who may aid in the students' success, but who have not or are not able to impart information or help students interpret that information. In this case, a drifter may have ample social support to “make up” for information gaps he may experience. The converse can also be seen: a dreamer may have a guide to help him make informed, strategic goals and decisions, but may not have the emotional support or the “constitution” to succeed.

Furthermore, students are not fixed in these categories; they are representative of a collection of behaviors rather than something inherent in the nature of the student. I will argue that at least two students have changed categories, one over the course of this study. These categories could also be seen as stages, as in the case of the student who made a progression from the drifter to the passenger category. A dreamer may become a drifter or even a planner as she encounters experiences and information that force her to adjust her career goals and begin to plan for them. For example, as the oldest student in the study describes himself right out of high school, he likely would have been classified a dreamer or a drifter, but by the time of this interview, perhaps due to his military and comparably longer life experience, he was categorized as a planner.

Since there are many variables at play when dealing with information, I will begin the discussion of each category with a brief description of the students who are representative of that group. All names are pseudonyms. I will then discuss how students in each of those four categories tended to use, or eschew, different types of information sources.

**Planners.** The planners tend to be very strategic and seek out information that they believe will help them achieve their goals. Three of the fifteen students were classified as planners. They include Darcy, a white female and daughter of two college graduates, Brett, a white male Army veteran and first-generation college student, and Bethany, an African-American daughter of a single mom, who is a college graduate. Darcy said that she came undecided about her career plan, but knew she wanted to do something with graphic design and engineering or business, perhaps product design. She

was the most curious about my research, asking me questions about the doctoral degree program after our first interview. Brett wants to continue in the type of work that he was doing in the service and so is pursuing a degree in emergency management and planning. Bethany was interested in athletic training, but is now focusing on a more general field of physical rehabilitation, which she thinks will be more marketable. All three students work. Darcy assists with birthday parties and other events at a local recreation center. Brett does a variety of odd jobs and was the most flexible regarding his work schedule. Bethany works in the coffee shop of a grocery store, which she finds to be a supportive employer, both in terms of schedule flexibility and also tuition assistance through employee scholarships.

Darcy is emblematic of the planners; although she has parents who are involved in her college journey and who have the financial resources to hire a private tutor for her in the spring semester, she takes a lot of personal responsibility for getting the information that she needs. Her parents certainly play a large role in the information that she is able to acquire and put to use, but Darcy also exhibits a skill connecting with her instructors and advisors independent of them. This is true of all three planners, who all actively seek out sources and people who can provide them with information.

Of all of the interview participants, Darcy was the most specific in her ability to recall information. She knows the name of her advisor and the transfer advisor. She also knows exactly which courses that she needs to complete and refers to them by number. Darcy's knowledge of individual courses and how she will use them to amass enough credits to transfer echoes Oyserman, Johnson, and James' (2011) finding that middle

school students who had general strategies for improvement in school, such as “working hard” were less successful than students with more specific strategies, such as “doing homework every night.” Although not all of the planners were as precise as Darcy, they were fully aware that their remedial placement impacted their time to degree and freely spoke about this.

All three planners clearly stated the importance of having a strategy, particularly when it comes to their educational goals. While there was uncertainty in all three planner's futures, all three are uncomfortable if they do not know their next steps. Darcy describes herself as:

I'm a planner with everything. ... Like, when I get homework, I go home that day and do it. I hate having something sit on my shoulder. I hate thinking about what it could be or what could happen. Like, I just like to get things done and move on.

Bethany, another planner, describes her need for planning, which seems to be connected to a sense of maturity:

I'd rather plan ahead instead of not know what I'm doing. 'Cause like, in certain situations, it's like, alright, I'm gonna go with the flow. But this is, like, a future, and a career we're talking about. I feel like it needs to be planned out. It doesn't have to be set in stone, but it needs to be... You need to have a backbone of what you're doing and where you wanna go.

That maturity and sense of focus is also a key trait in Brett, the third planner, who describes his attitude as, “I definitely feel like that is my job, and I take pride in my work, and, you know, I try to do the best I can, so – and I actually have the best grades of my life probably this semester.”

Brett is the oldest student in the sample, having served in the Army for a few years. He had registered at MCC out of high school, but dropped out before even starting

classes. He attributes his newfound professionalism to being in the Army and his statements also reflect that background, such as his statement, “I’m here to accomplish a mission, you know?” When Brett’s relationship to various information sources are examined later in the chapter, I will argue that Brett would not have always been classified as a planner, underlining the changeable nature of the categories. Currently, however, he exhibits the traits of planners: focused, possessing specific information, and, perhaps most importantly, using this information to make strategic, informed decisions.

**Dreamers.** The four dreamers are Jill, an African-American female, Katie, a white female, Michael, and Tre, both African-American males. Jill is friendly, expressive and talkative. Jill’s mother works in retail, as does Jill, and her step-father does local deliveries for a thrift store. Katie is the quietest student interviewed and was most animated when talking about her part-time job in a gymnastics center. Her single mother is a housekeeper. Michael has an animated personality and is clearly testing boundaries, reveling in his new-found freedom after attending what he describes as a strict high school environment. He tries to keep a low profile at his fast food job, denying an offered management position. Tre was soft spoken. His late night job at the airport often leaves him tired during the day.

All four dreamers are first-generation college students and I consider all to be working class, based on their parents’ occupations. I’ll look more closely at the intersection of race, gender, first-generation status and the categories after describing all of the groups. There are a range of personalities in this category, including Katie, the shyest student interviewed, and Michael, one of the most gregarious students. They

expressed the most ambitious career goals for their starting places, but were unable to articulate mid-range plans or information needs that would help them reach their destinations.

The dreamers' career goals are academically ambitious, given their starting points, and occasionally bordering on fantasy, such as Tre's description of the path he sees to playing in the NFL:

to go into the NFL League, you have to do at least two years of college. So if I do one year here, I'd probably already be on my way to going into the League, and then all I'd have to do is get looked at by coaches and go to the NFL's sports camp thing, and then that's where all the coaches be at. And then from there on, who knows? I'd probably make it to a team that's going to the Super Bowl or something.

Several of the students in the study had both an expressed career goal tied to an academic path that they were pursuing at the college and a separate career goal sometimes only loosely related to their college studies. Tre says he is pursuing engineering, but still maintains that he sees a life for himself playing football. Jill, one of the two female dreamers, ultimately wants to be an orthodontist, but is attempting to get into MCC's dental hygiene program. Michael, another dreamer, is in the college's communication program, but also manages rappers and intends to build an online sports television network, both of which he figures have nothing to do with his program of study. Michael mentioned that his mom wants him to graduate, figuring:

I'm just gonna do it just so she can be happy. If you ask why I'm in college, I'd be like, "So my mom could be happy," 'cause if it was up to me, I'd be trying to do this music thing and this sports-show thing.

All four dreamers aspire to careers they are unlikely to achieve, particularly given that they do not seem to understand that they are starting from a disadvantage and do not

articulate specific actions or mid-range steps or goals. In this, the dreamers are reminiscent of what Deil-Amen and DeLuca (2010) refer to as “the underserved third,” students who are neither academically prepared for a transfer curriculum nor set on an occupational track.

Jill describes the temptation of a local, private technical school, which I'll call “Diamond Academy,” that was recommended to her by a friend:

Like, [Diamond Academy] has a dental hygienist, so I'll basically be doing the same thing I am doing here, there. But I wouldn't have to do the academics, like the math and the reading and the history and all that. Like, I can just do hands on.

The little information that Jill received from her friend is inaccurate; Diamond Academy does not offer a dental hygienist or even a dental assisting program. It is worrisome that Jill refers to this unaccredited for-profit as “the same,” as MCC, only without the academics that clearly challenge her. This example highlights the dangers of uninformed decision-making that leads so many students off-track.

Some of the dreamers express intentionally delaying finding out information that would put their high goals in jeopardy. Jill describes putting off selecting a transfer destination this way:

I don't want to make my plans to go here [a transfer school] and then somewhere through here [upcoming semesters] something happens and it jeopardizes me getting here. Then it's like I already have my heart and my mind set on this.

All of the dreamers expressed that they were putting off obtaining or waiting to gather information that they knew they needed. Jill's statement above was the most self-protective, worrying that if she confirmed something, it would force her to adjust her

dream. This is in stark contrast to the planners, who as a whole, were uncomfortable with not having a well-defined plan.

Perhaps the combination of lofty goals and an indifference to (and sometimes avoidance of) information to help them plan proved to be too much for two of the dreamers, Jill and Tre, who did not return in the spring semester of the study. They were the only students in the study who did not return in the spring.

**Passengers.** Most of the students fall in between the planners and the dreamers. They are adept at finding and using information in some aspects of their educational pathways, but not in others. Within this group are students who have access to information sources, but do not use them or do not use them strategically. While not actively putting off information seeking as some of the dreamers, many of these students have delayed making mid-range decisions, such as choice of transfer institution or degree program. These characteristics describe both the passengers and the drifters. However, unlike the drifters, the passengers either have a guide to help them navigate the system and use the information that they passively gather or they are on a path that requires little negotiation.

The three passengers include Maggie, a white female and first-generation college student, and Luke and Matt, both white males with one parent who is a college graduate. As I will discuss in more depth later, Matt would have been considered a drifter in the fall, but is categorized as a passenger in the spring. Only three students were in the planner and passenger categories, the smallest groups in the study. With the passengers, this is partially due to the fact that it takes students enrolled in developmental courses

longer to enter a program of study. Once students are in their major courses, they might have a faculty advisor to provide guidance, they can more clearly see the relationship between their courses and chosen career, and they have a clearer path to completion, any of which could help lift them from the drifter to the passenger category.

Maggie, having set her transfer destination in the fall, was working with transfer advisors both at MCC and the transfer institution. Since she had only planned on taking courses for a year and was not seeking a degree from MCC, she had fewer information needs than her counterparts. She engaged with advisors to ensure that the courses she took would transfer.

Luke is deciding between pursuing a business or a liberal studies degree and has not yet set his transfer destination. His information needs were more complex than Maggie's, but Luke is on one of the college's athletics teams and therefore has both a dedicated athletic advisor and a coach to help him collect information to inform his decisions. These guides also help him choose classes that fit either of the programs of study that he is considering and most four-year school articulation agreements.

The third passenger, Matt, would have been considered a drifter after his first interview, but by the spring had been assigned to a faculty advisor for the hospitality program. At that point, he also had the faculty member for one of his major classes, so she knows him and his career goals and can set him on the correct path. I'll describe the role of guides, particularly in regard to passengers, when information sources are discussed later in this chapter.

**Drifters.** The drifters lack both the strong internal drive to plan of the planners and the knowledgeable, personal guide or clear pathway of the passengers. While there are aspects of confusion, the drifters tend to know when they need more information, which distinguishes them from the dreamers. Just as Bourdieu describes how you can have the cards in your hand, but not know how to strategically play them, so, too, can students possess the information, but not effectively use it to inform behavior. The drifters are the largest group of students in the study, with five students exhibiting the characteristics of this category. The drifters include Vanessa, an African-American female; Nathan, an African-American male; Jason, a white male; and April and Sylvia, both white females. All five are first-generation college students.

Drifter Vanessa's expressed desire to “get out” of her developmental math class has not quite led to her asking anyone how she can accomplish this, so she is going into the spring semester math class with a false expectation:

*Vanessa:* Math 011 doesn't [count towards my degree]... I'm trying to get out of there, I really, really am. I mean... I don't want to take Math 011.

*Interviewer:* How do you get out of it?

*Vanessa:* I don't know. I guess just do good in the first three classes or something and see what your teacher says to move you up. But... hopefully... I don't know.

*Interviewer:* The teachers can place you out?

*Vanessa:* I think so.

Since Vanessa knows that there is an advantage to placing out of developmental math, she's a step ahead of the dreamers, who do not strategize even to that small extent.

Although “getting out” of developmental math is an information-based strategy, Vanessa does not know that she can take the placement test a second time to try to improve her

score. She possesses the information - this course does not count - but cannot successfully apply or activate that knowledge.

The drifters are sometimes able to articulate that the information that they need is available. When asked if she feels like it's "on her" to get the information that she needs, Vanessa replied,

I do. I mean they tell you about it, they have papers out. I mean you have to just go and figure things out – your own. No, but I'd say they're very helpful. Like they have a lot of like a lot, a lot of help. If you don't know where to go, the teachers will tell you. They got teachers; they got tutoring services; they got everything.

April, another drifter, concurs, but highlights another characteristic of the drifters: "I know the information, it's just I don't do it. That's my problem." Both April and Vanessa realize that they know or that there are people available to assist them, but have trouble really engaging in the process or utilizing the information to help themselves.

### **Interaction of Categories and Characteristics**

Before I discuss how students in each category interacted with the varied information sources that they encountered, I will examine some of the demographic characteristics of the students and the relationships that emerged between these characteristics and the categories of information behavior. Although testing Bourdieu's framework was not an aim of this study, his concept of cultural capital as an element of a larger mechanism of social reproduction can be applied to the themes identified in this case study, particularly when looking at demographic characteristics of race, first-generation college student status, and class. The disparity between planners and passengers as a group and drifters and dreamers as a group along first-generation status

lines in particular illustrates Bourdieu's assertion that information can be a form of capital that allows parents to confer benefit to their children in a way that is almost invisible, as it is often disguised as academic merit. Even in a community college setting, where the scale of what is considered wealthy is considerably reduced, we see distinction between students with similar academic backgrounds based on the information behavior categories identified above.

**Race.** As shown in Table 3, both male and female students can be found in all four categories, with similar numbers in each. Although this is a very small sample size and we cannot generalize from it, it is interesting to note that, of the six African-American students, only one female is classified a planner and none are considered to be a passenger. All three African-American males in the study were classified as drifters or dreamers.

Michael, one of the African-American dreamers, could be considered a passenger because of his voluntary participation in the college's Minority Male Mentoring Program (MMMP). I will discuss the benefits that Michael gains from his mentoring relationship when information resources are examined. However, at the time of the fall interview, Michael's stated goals, among them "to get to \$1 million before I turn 25. That's my main goal. I don't know how to do it, but I'll get to \$1 million legally before I turn 25," had little to do with his educational pathway, which, as described above, seemed more about making his mother happy. Since Michael did not attend a follow-up interview in the spring, it is possible that through the personal guidance of mentors, he may have moved to the passenger category.

Table 3						
<i>Number of students in each category by gender and race</i>						
<u>Category</u>	<u>Female</u>			<u>Male</u>		
	<u>African-American</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>African-American</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Total</u>
Planner	1	1	2	0	1	1
Passenger	0	1	1	0	2	2
Drifter	1	2	3	1	1	2
Dreamer	1	1	2	2	0	2

**Age.** Most of the students were between the ages of 18 and 20; only one, Brett, a planner, was slightly older than the rest, at 23. While it is not possible to separate the effects of his age and maturity from his military experience, Brett's experience in the service had a direct bearing on his ability to navigate an educational bureaucracy. The students aged 18-20 were fairly evenly distributed among the categories, with the youngest students slightly more clustered in the dreamer and drifter categories.

Table 4						
<i>Number of students in each category by gender and age</i>						
<u>Category</u>	<u>Female</u>			<u>Male</u>		
	<u>Age 18</u>	<u>Age 19</u>	<u>Age 20</u>	<u>Age 18</u>	<u>Age 19</u>	<u>Age 20+</u>
Planner		2				1
Passenger		1			1	1
Drifter	1	1	1		2	
Dreamer	1	1		1	1	

**First-generation college status.** All of the African-American males in the study were first-generation college students; a characteristic of all of the drifters and dreamers. Of the 15 students interviewed, only four were not first-generation students. All four non-first generation students were categorized as planners or passengers and only two first-generation students were categorized in this way, as shown in Table 5. In this study, the student's first-generation status clearly has a relationship with his information behavior. Considering that first-generation college students are more likely to attend community colleges, this tie is worth further examination.

Table 5		
<i>Interview participants by category and first-generation college student status</i>		
<u>Category</u>	<u>Non-first-generation</u>	<u>First-generation</u>
Planner	2	1
Passenger	2	1
Drifter	0	5
Dreamer	0	4

What separates the first-generation planner and passenger from all of their drifter and dreamer peers? Brett, while the only first-generation college student among the planners, is also the oldest of the participants and a veteran, which provides him with experience navigating a different kind of institutional bureaucracy. He directly credits his experience in the service with skills that he uses to navigate the college system, in a way, “making up” for his first-generation college student status. When he graduated from high school, Brett was a self-described “hot mess.” Had he been interviewed at that time, he likely would have shared characteristics of the drifters or dreamers.

Maggie, the first-generation passenger, transferred out of MCC after the second interview. Since she did not plan on graduating from MCC and was taking courses that would be accepted by the other institution, her track was set for her. Brett and Maggie illustrate two ways that may lessen information problems of first-generation students: providing guidance to get the information or to lessen the need for it in the first place.

Of the non-first-generation college students, only Darcy had two parents with college degrees. When asked if she thought that having two parents who are college graduates gave her an advantage, Darcy expresses that it does, adding, “and it makes me want to go even more. I think that if I was choosing not to go to college, it would be a war, like... just an argument.” As described by Deil-Amen (2008), Darcy exhibits a college-going habitus. There was never a question that she would go to college, so dropping out is not under question either.

Nationally, black, Hispanic, and first-generation college students are more likely to take remedial courses than their white, Asian, and non-first generation college student counterparts (Sparks & Malkus, 2013). This sample reflects this national picture. Although I did not select participants based on first-generation college student status, only four of the 15 students were not first-generation students. The uneven distribution of first-generation and non-first-generation college students among the categories, particularly between the planners and passengers as a group and drifters and dreamers as a group, is supportive of Bourdieu’s cultural capital framework. Students whose parents went to college benefit from this experience and students whose parents did not attend

college appear in this study to be at a disadvantage, at least in terms of their abilities to utilize information in developing strategies to meet their educational objectives.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus may also be at work here through students' socioeconomic status. I did not ask students about their household income, but based on descriptions of parents' occupations, I would generalize that all of the students are working class or low-income. The one exception is planner Darcy, who is the only student I would classify as middle class.

**County of residence.** Another demographic characteristic that appears to have some relationship to the categories is the student's county of residence. MCC is located approximately one hour outside of a mid-Atlantic city, where Urban Community College (UCC) is located. Residents of MCC's sponsoring county pay a lower tuition rate than students from neighboring areas. Table 6 shows the number of students in each category by residence. These figures overlap with the racial demographics because all three African-American males live out-of-county, two from the city and one from a neighboring suburban county.

Table 6		
<i>Interview participants by category by current residence</i>		
<u>Category</u>	<u>In-County</u>	<u>Out-of-County</u>
Planner	3	0
Passenger	2	1
Drifter	4	1
Dreamer	1	3

Most of the students who attend MCC from out-of-county actually live closer to another community college. The students' reasons for traveling and sometimes spending more to attend MCC are quite similar. Nathan, a drifter, reasons:

my options were you can go to UCC, which is kind of like going to your neighborhood high school because you know everyone and everything. Or you can come out here and have like a little more of a peaceful environment and stuff like that – smaller classes.

He adds that UCC would be a social distraction, “If I went to UCC, I would constantly be either at parties or hanging out with people because of so many people I know.” Vanessa, another drifter, also notes that it is not the social aspect that brings her to college: “I don’t mind not knowing anybody. . . . I didn’t want to be around all my friends because I was going to see them any other day anyway.” Nathan's thoughtful decision to place himself in an environment where he can concentrate is a strategy based on self-awareness.

On the other hand, dreamer Michael chooses not to go to his local community college, Western Community College (WCC) for the opposite reason; he doesn't know anyone: “I’m not gonna transfer to WCC. I don’t know nobody. I don’t like going places where I don’t know nobody, like, not one person.” Affordability and perceived quality are also driving factors for Michael: “And [MCC's] cheaper. WCC crazy, and they don’t even got the same programs. Mayfair's one of the best community colleges in the country, but I’m not about to leave here and to go WCC. No.” Although quality and affordability play into Michael's decision to attend a community college farther away, notably, attention to what he needs from a learning environment did not. Michael may very well not need the distractions of having friends attend the same school.

Now that I've outlined the characteristics of the dreamers, drifters, passengers, and planners, I will turn to the sources of information available to, even if not used by all of, the students.

### **Sources of Information**

Students in each of the categories pull from a variety of information sources. Sometimes students within the same category utilize the same information source, but with very different outcomes. Next, I examine the various people and settings where students may or may not receive guidance and direction and describe how the dreamers, drifters, passengers, and planners may incorporate those sources into reaching their educational goals.

#### **Personal sources.**

*Parents and relatives.* Parents, siblings, and other close relatives were not a source of information for a vast majority of the students. Only Darcy describes getting information from and discussing strategies with her parents, especially her father. Parents certainly figured into college experience for many of the students, but in a supportive role, mediating access to information rather than acting as a source of it. In both first-generation and non-first-generation cases, there were students who had a parent (always a mother), accompany them to placement tests, advising sessions, or campus tours.

The same action, such as accompanying a student to an advising appointment, takes on different characteristics in passengers and dreamers. Tre, a dreamer, shares, “my mom had a lot of questions.” When I asked Tre what types of questions she had, he said, “I forgot, to tell you the truth, but it was a lot of questions that she was asking – that she

always asks, that like she think about if it is benefitting me or her. That's about it."

Compare Tre's passive role with a passenger student and the distinction between these categories becomes clearer. Luke, a passenger, also had his mother accompany him to a meeting with an advisor, but sees her as a supportive partner rather than a lead, asking her to come along because "I didn't want to go and get there and then not know what I was doing." When asked if his mother asked any questions of the advisor, Luke replied, "No, not really, because we talked about it before we went there, so we were pretty much on the same page."

Drifter Sylvia relies on her mother for assistance in completing financial aid requirements, even sharing her college login with her. She seems content to not play a role in the financial aspect of her college education. In contrast, when I confirmed with Brett, a planner, that he does not seem to consult with his parents, he agreed: "Not so much. My mom knows that I'm goal-oriented. I'm gonna get shit done. I'm gonna do what I have to do." Brett lives with his parents, but most likely because he's older than his peers or is more independent now, he does not rely on them for information or assistance.

Five participants have older siblings who are in or graduated from college, including all three of the passengers and two of the dreamers. Surprisingly, all of the college graduate older siblings are a different gender than the participant, which may have an impact on those sibling relationships. Although siblings do not provide a lot of information, the passengers describe more of an exchange than the dreamers. Luke, a passenger, describes getting advice from his sister, who recently transferred from MCC to a local, private, Catholic college as an education major. When asked if he felt prepared

for college-level work, Luke credited his sister, who “helped me a lot with that. She was saying like what things you should do when studying and stuff like that.” Asked if he solicited this information, he replied, “Most of it I asked for, but there’s some that she just offered advice herself.”

Compare this level of advice with Tre, who is a dreamer and has an older sister who graduated from college. The way he describes this relationship is incredibly ambiguous:

And then my sister, she just graduated I think two years ago from [small, private, Catholic college], so she was like, “Yeah, you should go to college to see how you like it.” But she know that I’m not a big school fan, so, I don’t... she didn’t think that I could make – like she knew I could do it, but she really didn’t think I would pass all the classes, like. But she... she supported me with the college thing though.

Other family members also serve to model or warn some of the students. Michael, a dreamer, knew that placement testing had implications for developmental coursework from his uncle. He describes his uncle's warning this way:

Yeah, I knew about that one math. I knew if I mess up I gotta go to the slow math. That’s one thing I knew. That’s ’cause my uncle told me. He’s like, “Yo, if you mess up, they gonna put you in the dumbest math they got at your school, all these old people there that don’t do nothing. You’ll be mad.” I’m like, “No, I’m not even trying to do that, man.”

Despite his uncle's cautionary advice and his own expressed desire not to be placed in the “slow math,” Michael did not do anything to prepare for the placement test. “The first time I did bad, ’cause I really wasn’t trying to be in there. I just wanted to take it real quick and pass it real quick just so I can get in college.” For the retest, he “actually took it” and was placed in the second-level of developmental math, but maintained that he was pleased since it wasn't the lowest level.

Relatives are also used as models, trusted because they have achieved something that is desirable to the student. Brett describes members of his family and his girlfriend's family as “definitely succeeded in their life, I should say, so they – you know, I take their judgment and what they think to heart,” so when they encouraged him to use his GI bill to go back to school, he passed up a well-paying job opportunity to invest in his education. Similarly, April, a drifter, describes her aunt as “having the perfect life.” After falling out with her mother and moving in with first one set of grandparents and then her other, April has the least stable home life of all of the participants. So, she describes her aunt's “perfect life” this way:

She has a good job and then they have a good income. Like, they can do things that I can't do with my family. Like, I mean, they're more interactive with me so I'm always involved with what they do because they basically act like I'm a part of their whole little close family.

Although not information or advice, April's uncle seemed to ease her anxiety by helping her to concentrate on the first couple of years of college, telling her,

“If you stay in college for two years, you'll be fine for the other two years.” Basically that's how he put it to me, so as long as you can start off with the two years you'll be okay. So I'm like, all right, good mindset.

These relatives provide encouragement, but in a very general way. Because there are no specific strategies presented, the students have to figure out for themselves how to “stay in college for two years” or avoid “slow math.”

*Classmates, Friends and Co-Workers.* In the literature, there is evidence that classmate ties strengthen community college students' integration. Karp and Hughes (2008) caution that these relationships have to go beyond mere acquaintances: “knowing people to say hello to in the hallways did not strongly influence students' sense of

belonging; knowing people through whom one could learn about professors, course options, or support services did” (p. 76). Other than their study, much of the literature regarding the role of classmates in community college student integration is on learning communities and student success courses. Perhaps the absence of learning communities at MCC is why classmates did not emerge as a source of information for most students. Nor was there any evidence that the students in this study received information from their success course classmates. I will examine the information associated with the student success course later in the chapter.

Drifter Sylvia was able to draw a comparison to her mother's experience in a cohort-based LPN program. When asked if she saw an advantage to her mother's cohort-based program, she replied:

I think so because like you're getting used to, like, the people you're with so, like, she has study groups all the time, so it's not, like, on Monday she's with different people than she is with Wednesday, because if they have a problem Monday then they can discuss it Wednesday. Or if... like, when they're doing homework, like, they can always have study groups. Like, she's with everyone that she's with in school, like, at clinical in the hospital so, like, they can all help each other.

Although Sylvia describes the benefits of being in a cohort program, she does not see that at MCC. She sees herself as belonging to more study groups as she moves into harder courses for her intended major of nursing, but right now she does not enjoy the support of a group of students who are traveling her path.

As for most community college students, a vast majority of time that the students spend on campus is in class. Therefore, all students were asked about the social aspects of their courses. All students reported some of their classes being more “social” than others.

Topics of conversation were usually the instructor of the course, current events, or weekend plans. In this research, very few students described getting information from classmates. One student reasoned that in most of his courses the students are all on different tracks and at different points on them. Other students expressed that once they were taking more of their major requirements, they would interact with their classmates more, specifically mentioning studying together.

Friends who also attend the college did, however, connect the students in the study to college resources. Nathan, a drifter, said of his friend who was enrolled before him, “he basically tells me what’s what here. He showed me, like, how like, to gauge the bussing schedules, all of that. Like where everything was if I didn’t know.” A couple of students also reported that it was a friend who introduced them to specific resources. Here dreamer Michael describes how he found out about the College's Minority Male Mentoring Program, where advisors Ted and Wallace work:

My man Jay was like, “Yo, go holler at Ted and Wallace. They can get you into [Urban U.] and all that for free. And you’ll automatically get accepted. Talk to them.” That’s how I found out about dual enrollment and all that.

In Michael's case, his friend's recommendation connected him with an important college source of information and guidance, rather than providing it himself.

In addition to receiving information from friends, several of the students describe being information providers themselves. Darcy recommended her math instructor to her cousin. Maggie encouraged a classmate to try out the college's tutoring services: “the one girl, she asked me. She’s like, 'How did you get your math grade up?' and then I told her about the tutoring place and I was like, 'You should go.’” It seems likely that both Darcy,

a planner, and Maggie, a passenger, would be in a place to share information with friends and classmates. However, April, a drifter, also assisted friends with navigation problems. In describing this experience, she is very aware of her own trouble putting the information into practice:

I have friends that are in high school and ... they're like, 'when do you have to get this in?' Like, I know the information, it's just I don't do it. That's my problem. I'm helping other people out with it, but...

All three young women provide information to others, but, in addition to not being able to apply the information to herself, April also differs from Darcy and Maggie in her comfort with other students. Unlike Darcy and Maggie, April was more suspicious of her classmates, particularly in courses in her major. She seemed unwilling to engage with the more serious students, preferring the atmosphere of her developmental courses:

the lower classes that aren't legit college courses, they're more fun and, like, we all interact more and the normal classes, my marketing class... I mean, we interact and stuff, but it's more strict and more doing what you have to do and listening and taking notes and stuff.

In contrast, Darcy is more comfortable in her college-level courses, complaining about the classmates in her remedial courses being disrespectful to the teacher. When asked if there were other serious students in her classes, Darcy replied, "In the math – in the college course - in the regular college course, yes. In the remedial classes, I would say half and half." Focused students like Darcy almost seem to intimidate April: "When you're in a legit class like my marketing class, I'm kind of like, you can't really talk to anybody because they're all in their own little world so it's like, it's kind of hard." Since April does not feel comfortable in the college-level classes that count toward her major, she is missing out on an important source of information from other students on her path.

Almost all of these students have strategies for registration and transfer, but they have not yet incorporated some necessary information into the development of these strategies. For example, I asked Vanessa, a drifter, if she ever gets recommendations on instructors from her classmates; she immediately said no. A few questions later, however, she “realized” that she could seek out a specific faculty member and sign up for his or her course: “I mean I could actually specifically go get that teacher that teaches that class; I just realized that.” Compare this with Darcy, who not only uses this strategy, but even went as far as seeking out an advisor who will give her recommendations, even though she is “not supposed to do it,” reasoning, “I feel like if I have a good teacher, I do a lot better.” While feeling empowered to seek out instructors who may be able to support them better is one little strategy, these small moments of know-how can add up and were almost invisible to many of the students in the study.

Classmates, usually mere acquaintances, did not generally prove to be a source of information for this group of students. Friends who are also taking classes at MCC were more likely to connect students to resources. Co-workers, particularly if the student has a job somewhat related to their intended career, and other adult acquaintances are also potential sources of college guidance. Since none of the students were following a parent or relative into a profession, other adults working in these fields could potentially be useful when students are examining degree and transfer options. The planners sought out this type of advice. Darcy talked to several professors at URU, where she wants to transfer, who advised her to approach her career goal in product design through engineering and business rather than art. Another planner, Bethany, was connected to a

current physical therapy student through one of her professors and has already begun corresponding with him and getting advice about her career path.

Even a drifter, Jason, uses his mother's contacts in law enforcement: "I kind of ask them what they went through for education and then I use that to help me for what I've got to go through." Vanessa, a drifter who entered undecided and is now planning to be an accountant, does not know any accountants and chose this career based on an instrument that she took in her orientation course. Another drifter, Sylvia, despite aspiring to a career in nursing and working at her part-time job with nurses, has not yet made a connection. When asked if she knows where the nurses at the assisted living facility where she works went to school, Sylvia admitted, "No, I don't know. I've never, like, asked them."

### **College sources.**

***Orientation course.*** A two-credit college orientation course, called Strategies for College Success (SCS) is required for all students who place into two or more developmental classes. The college catalog describes the course as covering "academic success strategies, including an orientation to college life, self-assessment and goal setting, study skills and time management, familiarization with college resources, and appreciation of cultural diversity." The SCS course instructor serves as the students' academic advisor for that semester, meeting with students individually to help them register for courses and discuss academic plans.

Of the 15 students interviewed, 14 were required to take this course. One student in the sample, Luke, the home-schooled student, placed into only one developmental

course (math) and therefore was not required to take SCS. Another student, Bethany, was not scheduled for the SCS class in the fall semester and had to take it in the spring. In the fall interviews, 13 of the 15 students were enrolled in the SCS course, which allows for some interesting comparisons, particularly since one of the stated purposes of this course is to assist students with navigating college procedures and policies.

One of the topics of discussion that students found helpful was career exploration, particularly for Vanessa, who came in undecided. Jason was impressed with the personal attention he received from his SCS instructor describing, “She actually sent me...when the schools and people who are in the Criminal Justice program were up here, she actually sent me an email on what time they were going to be and where they were going to be.” Some of the students mentioned specific pieces of advice, such as dreamer Tre, who commented:

when we first went in there [SCS], she said it’s good to meet new classmates and, like, try to know at least three different people in each class. So it’s great. Yeah, pretty helpful.

*Interviewer:* Was that good advice?

*Tre:* Yeah, because I know at least three different people in each one of my classes, and that kind of helped me in my classes, so I don’t feel like I’m just the only one in there.

According to most of the students, dreamers to planners, the assistance with scheduling was the most beneficial aspect of the course. April describes SCS as allowing her to be more independent, not having to rely on others:

when you go to [the College’s administrative building], they pretty much give everything to you so you don’t really know how to get the information yourself, but with the College Success class, they like... you’re just like, “oh, that’s where they get that paper from. I can get it myself.”

Other students described the registration process through the SCS as simply more convenient and did not mention any increased confidence in being able to self-register.

Although the scheduling aspect of the course was the most well-received of the topics covered, two of the six students who were interviewed again in the spring semester had registration difficulties as a result of the advising that they received from their SCS instructors. Matt was not signed up for a required major course that then could not be added in due to his work schedule. After talking with his program advisor, Matt will take the required course in the fall, but his frustration was evident. April incorrectly placed herself in college-level math when she had a second-level developmental course to complete. April described the confidence that she felt in self-registering in the fall:

We went through and [my SCS teacher] taught us exactly how to just register online, which was actually really cool because you can just figure it out yourself because you don't need to go to [the administrative building] to get it figured out. ... If you know what you're doing, you're fine. It's really simple and easy to do it, which I probably will be doing that for the rest of my classes instead of going to [the administrative building] and figuring it out. 'Cause I know what I'm going for and there's a paper that you can print up that shows for your major, for your associate's of what you're going for and what classes that you need to take and you can just go down the line and look at that, type it up...there's like a website for it that you can plug in what you want, what times you want, and everything is basically already set up for you, if you know how to use it.

Unfortunately, she didn't quite know how to use it because the self-advising tools did not take into account her math placement scores, allowing her to register for college-level math prematurely. In the spring, her college-level math instructor realized that she was there by mistake two weeks into the semester. At that point, April moved into an online section of the correct math, only to abandon it by the time of our second interview

because she struggled with the online format. The newfound independence that April described in the fall has been replaced with insecurity in her ability, since she put the blame of the mistake on herself.

When asked, “would you expect the system to not let you register for classes that you weren’t supposed to take?” April replied, “Yeah, that’s what I thought that’s how it would be.” She also feels that the SCS course may have expected too much, reflecting, “I don’t think [SCS] really helped, though, because, obviously, if you were put in that class, that means you’re asking for help. Which means, obviously, they should give [you] more opportunity to ... help get through it.” April trusted that the system would not let her take the wrong course or that her SCS instructor would have alerted her to this potential problem. She resolved only to use the advisors from this point forward.

Bethany, a planner, and Matt, a passenger, were particularly hostile toward the SCS course. Both had arguments that it should not have been mandatory for them. Since she was incorrectly not registered for the class in the fall and had to take it in the spring, Bethany commented, “I don't know why I have to take it, if I did so well in my first semester, it’s like, why am I here?” Matt was required to take the SCS course even though he placed himself in his second developmental course. He found the course simplistic, lamenting,

I always think that the strategies class is something that they’re trying to, like, put me in because I always felt, like, when I was in high school that I was just being given this, like, stuff because they thought I was, like, real slow about things. I mean I had to do these other classes in high school too and it did help, but it wasn’t, you know, something I really needed. It was like an everyday life kind of class.

Other than Bethany and Matt, who both argued for legitimate reasons that they should have been exempt, the other planners and passengers were more positive about the course than the drifters and dreamers.

In general, the planners see any source of information and guidance as positive. Darcy described the SCS course as “getting us comfortable with other things besides our little bubble.” In her second interview, Maggie said, “I don’t use it every day, but if something comes up I kind of go back to that class and I think about it. And I kept the book, because it helps.” Although Brett describes the class as “helpful” and “cool,” he adds that he feels it “is a little geared for people that are really straight outta high school, kinda still that – still a hot mess kinda deal, so... like how I was back in ’07. I had no idea ... what was going on.” Since Brett had previously had a tenuous relationship with college, dropping out after registering when he was 18, he often sees his younger self in his classmates.

Almost all of the planners and passengers were pointed in their criticism of other students in the class. Matt describes, “Everyone else is just blowing it off. They don’t really care.” Maggie concurs, “They don’t care, I guess. They’re just very rude and just ignorant, and they don’t... That’s the only class I have a problem with. Like, I like the class. It’s just the people in it I don’t like.”

The drifters and dreamers had mixed feelings about the SCS course, as a group and even within the same interview. Sylvia described it as “boring;” Jason found it “helpful.” In the space of a few minutes, April describes it as “pretty cool,” “pretty good,” “boring,” and “pointless.” Michael is the most vocal in his dislike for the course:

For real, SCS is a waste of money. Y'all, serious, that's a waste of a class. This one class I'm mad that it's mandatory. You gotta take it; it's a waste of a class. She's trying to teach you how to become a person. Like, how you gonna tell me how to do my own time management? I know how to manage my time; you manage your time.

With that hostility to the course, Michael could possibly be the type of classmate that the planners and passengers describe as not caring and even disruptive.

**Faculty.** Students spend more time with faculty members than any other college representative, allowing for the potential of relationships that can provide and help to apply information. Matt, a drifter turned passenger, made that transition due to his relationship with a faculty member who is also his program advisor. Because of this dual-role, I'll discuss her role as a guide for Matt, rather than as a course instructor. The students' experiences with SCS instructors was described in the last section, so here I will focus on interactions with instructors of courses other than the orientation course.

Across all groups, students expressed that they found their instructors approachable, even when there were misunderstandings. Brett, a planner, describes, "I have talked to teachers about some things and it worked out pretty good even though there was a little bit of conflict over something." In his second interview, Luke, a passenger, talks about making a connection with an instructor: "Last semester I liked my nutrition teacher a lot. She was really nice and she was just real helpful and I – she just helped me whenever I needed any help with any questions or anything like that. She's a really nice lady." He reports still having casual conversations with her although he is no longer in her class. Dreamer Tre agrees on the whole, saying "They'll talk and then listen, and then if you have questions, they'll answer your questions." This is a positive finding,

but, as we've seen with other sources, there is a difference between being approachable and actively helping students to strategize. There were fewer examples of instructors reaching out in this way.

Sometimes instructors introduce students to a resource by incorporating it into class, as is the case with Michael, a dreamer, whose reading instructor takes their class to the college's tutoring center: "It's a requirement for my reading class, but the other classes I just do it sometimes so my papers are better, 'cause then I can learn. ... So I try to go to [tutoring]." Another writing instructor gives extra points if students "get a second set of eyes on their paper," as Darcy puts it. It was through going to tutoring for that writing course that Darcy first started utilizing tutoring for her math course. Luke, a drifter, recalls a strategy from his instructors to sign up for classes early or they will fill. Bethany, a planner, was put in contact with a physical therapy student by her exercise science professor.

It was uniquely in the realm of the planners and passengers to actively seek information from their instructors. Passenger Maggie used her relationship with her first semester math instructor to get into the next level of math at a time she needed to take it: "my Math, it wasn't available, so I had to talk to the teacher I had last semester and he fit me in his class." Matt, a passenger, liked his developmental English teacher so much in the fall that he signed up for her college-level course in the spring. Since she did not teach the second-level college-level writing course, he asked her for a recommendation of who to take instead. Contrast Matt's recommendation-seeking with dreamer Katie, who expressed liking her reading teacher, but does not view her as a resource. When asked if

she would seek out this reading instructor's advice concerning course selection, she replied that she would not, "because that's not... that's not, like, her job." April, a drifter, also seems to have a defined expectation for what a professor should provide. She has difficulty negotiating her speech instructor's expectations, noting "She wants it her way, but she wants you to do it yourself. So it's like, you can't win in it." Even when interacting with the instructor, April is not getting the information that she needs from her: "And I'm lookin' at her like, alright, well, I mean, what do you want me to do?" The frustration with instructors is one factor that led April dropping three of her five classes in the spring.

*Advising.* Students primarily encountered advisors over the spring and summer prior to first interviews to register for their fall classes, as their SCS course instructors were their advisors during the semester for most students. The initial meeting with advisors occurred anywhere between spring of their high school senior year to the first or second week of class and lasted anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour.

The planners and passengers were uniformly positive about their advising experience. Maggie, a first-generation college student passenger focused on her advisor's ability to help her with choice: "I mean, it was kind of overwhelming, 'cause it was just a big book of, like, classes, but then she narrowed it down to four or five, and then I could choose, so that made it better." Her statement echoes the literature showing that too much choice might paralyze students and make it easier to make a misstep.

As noted earlier, Darcy sought out an advisor who would provide her with recommendations about which teachers to take and routinely returned to her and a

transfer advisor, both of which she knew by name. On advice from his coach, Luke took a class over the summer so that he could lessen his load during the season and worked with the dedicated advisor for student athletes to set up his course schedules each semester. Luke also referred to his dedicated advisor by name.

Most of the planners and passengers describe meeting with an advisor for longer; most also met with their advisors and picked courses in the spring, compared to most of the drifters and dreamers, who were often advised at the peak time, right before the start of classes and, therefore, did not get the same amount of attention. Maggie reflects, “I think I was there for an hour. She took her time with me, though. Like, she was really helpful.”

Even when they did meet with an advisor in the spring, the drifters and dreamers had mixed feelings about advising and were more likely to encounter mistakes. Vanessa didn't seem to know what to expect from advising, but she clearly thought that there was more information available than she was getting:

*Vanessa:* It was like only like 15 minutes, but, I mean it wasn't what I expected for the advisor.

*Interviewer:* Why do you say that?

*Vanessa:* Um... I don't know, because he's supposed to like – I don't know. He was supposed to go over more things with me, and he was like – I don't know. I feel like I was rushed into the classes and I didn't really know what I was getting into.

Vanessa had a better experience with her second advisor and reflects back on the first:

*Vanessa:* Yeah, I had like two different advisors. One of kinda steering me on a path, but the other was just like, “Well, okay, just do this.” Like there, I felt like – I don't know...

*Interviewer:* You felt brushed off?

*Vanessa:* Or settled. I felt settled. ... Like I was forced to settle.

There is an expressed difference here between being “steered on a path” and being “forced to settle” that appears to have something to do with providing students with information and guidance and empowering them to make the decision. In explaining the difference between the Accounting A.S. and Accounting A.A.S. degrees, April thought her advisor “seemed like she made it more understandable and then I’m like, ‘oh yeah, I’m going to want more money if I get the major instead of just, like... staying in the associate’s.’” Although she has trouble with the terminology, April understands that the A.S. will more easily transfer if she wanted to go for a bachelor’s of accounting and that’s what she decided to pursue.

Most students have strategies for when they take courses that they know are required. They seek a balance of math-related and non-math-related courses or a balance of general education and major requirements. Some know that they do not perform well in online courses or early morning courses or long evening courses that only meet once a week. When discussing creating their class schedules, only Darcy, a planner, mentioned the instructor as a factor in deciding what classes to take. Vanessa, a drifter, was not presented with enough options for setting up her class schedule. When I confirmed in the fall that she is on campus five days a week, she complained,

I mean I would have changed that if the advisor explained like how I can like search for my classes in a better way, and I would have only came here twice – I mean three times out of the week, like I’m doing next semester. I made my own schedule [for next semester].

Perhaps Vanessa’s frustration with not being presented with more scheduling options ties back to her comment about being “forced to settle” by her advisor. Upon entry, Vanessa

did not know that there was the possibility of taking courses three days a week instead of five.

The advisors were clearly providing remedial placement information to all of the students in the study, who knew that their remedial courses did not count towards their degree program. Most described finding out this information from advisors, as students at MCC meet with an advisor who interprets their test scores with them. This is a positive finding, since the Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum's (2002) study clearly showed a lot of confusion in their sample of community college around the status of remedial coursework and its implications.

When asked what she wished she had done differently when entering college, Sylvia expressed regret about placing into so many developmental classes, since they are holding her back from taking other pre-requisites for getting into the nursing program. Earlier in the fall, she retested on the advice of her SCS instructor, specifically to see if she could place out of the second-level reading course. Upon retesting, she did place out of the second-level reading, but just barely, so the advisor who went over her scores with her advised her to take the second-level anyway. Sylvia discussed this with her SCS instructor, who encouraged her to talk with her reading instructor. Sylvia remarks,

I don't want to be, like, falling behind because I never took [second-level] reading. So I would rather, like, take it even though, like, I was over the placement test [cut off score]. I would rather take it so, like, I'm ready for, like, a higher reading class,

despite the fact that there are no further courses in the reading sequence. Even though she stated that she was doing very well in her reading course, Sylvia went on the advisor's recommendation and registered for the second-level reading, reasoning "if an advisor

thinks I should take it, then I'm gonna take it." Although reading will hold her back from taking the sequence of science courses that she needs to apply to the nursing program, Sylvia did not seek the advice of her reading instructor, who is better equipped to help her make the decision to stay in the reading sequence than an advisor who only has a test score.

The "stigma-free" attitude regarding remediation described by Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2002) was evident in stories other than Sylvia's. Matt, who would have been classified as a drifter his first semester, took himself out of college-level English after the first week and registered into developmental English. The reason for his decision is a little muddled and appears to be more related to the instructor than the course content:

when I was in [college-level English], there were some things I didn't even understand when she started teaching and really wasn't that good of a professor at all. Kind of just kept talking out her personal life and not teaching, so I was like all right, I have to get out of that class.

Since he placed out of developmental English and received A's and B's in high school, simply looking for another instructor may have been a better strategy, but, like many of the students, Matt receives mixed information about his academic skills: "I've been told I can write really well. Um, so I guess [the developmental course] has just been helpful right now." Trying to reconcile conflicting information, such as test scores and instructor feedback, seems to be more of a hurdle for these students than other issues associated with developmental placement, such as increased time to degree. The best case scenario would be for students to have more individualized guidance to help them unravel these mixed messages to make decisions that will move them forward at an appropriate pace

for them. This brings us to our final and arguably most powerful information source: guides.

**Guides.** Guides are college personnel who have some connection with a student beyond advising, but who also impart information. Guides in this study included a coach, staff members in a mentoring program, a veteran's administrator, and a faculty advisor. Having a guide is a characteristic of the passengers; however, in the sample of students, both a planner and a dreamer also receive individual assistance from someone at the college. Sometimes students seek out a guide; Brett, a planner, utilizes the college's veteran's advisor. Michael, a dreamer, is voluntarily in the College's Minority Male Mentoring Program (MMMP). Other students come into contact with guides because they enter a more structured academic program with a dedicated faculty advisor or as part of a group to which they belong, such as an athletic team.

Having dropped out of college once before entering the Army, Brett actively seeks out people who can help him navigate the system. The College has a dedicated advisor for veterans, but, unlike the passengers who have guides, Brett clearly expresses that he is a full partner in the advisor-student relationship. He uses his dedicated advisor as one of many resources rather than solely being guided by him. Brett says of his advisor, “he was a huge help, very smart, understands where we’re all coming from, you know... so he kinda got me through the process to start here and everything,” but also comes prepared to meetings with his advisor. The way in which he describes registering for courses with Jim, the veteran's advisor, demonstrates Brett's responsibility and energy:

I jotted – you know, make up a little schedule, went to Jim, and I was like, “Hey, this is what I’m thinking. Like, let’s get the ball rolling.” ’Cause we

gotta submit that stuff so – in enough time that I can still – I’ll get paid then for the next semester.

Luke, a passenger, is not as proactive as Brett, but clearly benefits from guidance individualized for him from his coach and the dedicated advisor for athletes. Luke took a class over the summer on the advice of his coach, who “said that it’s easier for scheduling classes for the spring if you go and do a summer class, and it’s easier to get like all the credits that you need.”

The dreamers may have a guide who can assist them with some strategies, such as Michael, who is a part of the College's MMMP. Michael's advisors in the program are proactive, reaching out to Michael with advice and support, which he accepts. However, Michael's long term goals are disconnected from college graduation. On the one hand, he undergoes a three-hour daily commute to attend MCC rather than the community college closer to him. On the other, he views community college as a waiting room rather than as a stepping stone and seems to be going mostly to please his mother. With the foundation for his college attendance so unstable, Michael's mentors will have to address much more than information needs.

Michael spoke highly of his MMMP advisors. When I confirmed that he finds them more helpful than the SCS class, Michael agreed:

Yeah, they definitely are, 'cause it's not a whole class. It's just us two. It's just two people talking, so you get to do more things. You get to ask more questions, more – there's 30 people in the class, one teacher.

But it wasn't simply the one-on-one relationship that Michael prefers about his guides.

Ted and Wallace, his mentors in the program, take more time with him, as shown in his comparison with the general College advisors:

the only reason I know Ted and Wallace and remember their name is 'cause I was there for a while and... another advisor just push me through. It was probably a 10-minute process. Wallace, Ted'd be 45 minutes. He'd be talking to you, explaining every little its and bits of everything, and he'd e-mail you all week to make sure you're doing the right thing.

The time taken really pays off for Michael, who feels more in control now that he has these relationships. He reflects, "It feel better, 'cause now I know what's going on. I don't like to be out of the loop. I gotta do this. I'm not trying to be out of the loop."

It remains to be seen whether or not his mentors will assist Michael enough to compensate for his tenuous educational goals. Nevertheless, he clearly feels that he is more informed and in control than when he first started without the assistance of his mentors. He describes registering for the spring semester:

Yeah. I registered for spring with Ted and Wallace. Now I know what's going on and how my classes are gonna work and all that, what I need, how to get a book advance and all that. I didn't know none of that when I first got here. Now I know everything that's going on.

There is a sense of confidence that comes with reliable information for Michael.

Although not specifically in the context of this study, there was evidence that the guides provide emotional support and motivation along with facts, such as this piece of assurance from Brett's advisor: "He's like, you know, 'I've seen people do that. I've seen people still travel the path you're on. And it's all gonna work out in the end.'" If all of the drifters in this study had this type of informational guidance, would they, too, become passengers, more likely to make informed and timely decisions? In the next chapter, I will examine the implications of these findings and make suggestions for future research and practice.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The students in this study encountered hurdles as they began their journeys in pursuit of their educational and career goals. The number and scale of these challenges varied among the participants. Some students benefited from their own active engagement in the processes, others from college programs that made planning and progression more seamless. These differences and commonalities point to several implications for practice and suggest areas where further research is needed. Before I examine these implications for research and practice, I'll first turn to the research questions that framed this study.

#### **Review of Findings**

One of the strengths of using the semi-structured interview format is that it allows the researcher to follow her subjects' leads. The literature-informed research questions anchored this study and provided direction, but the findings and their implications extend the research questions in many ways. I will summarize how this case study illuminated each of the research questions in turn.

The first research question guided an exploration of information access as opposed to usage or application. It reads: *How do remedial community college students access college information, such as college policies, requirements, available services, and processes?*

As described in chapter four, only a small group of students could be described as active in their information seeking style. Most students encountered information

passively, through contact with advisors, personnel, and courses at the college. Of the four categories of information seeking and use that emerged in the analysis, only one category of students, the planners, were active in their pursuit of college knowledge. The majority of students fell into categories of passengers, drifters, and dreamers, all of which are characterized by a passive approach to information gathering. This study further suggests that, although the passengers and drifters are similarly passive, the passengers are positioned better to both acquire and apply the information that they need to reach their educational destinations. The passengers get on surer footing in one of two ways: either they have an individual guide to help them navigate the system or they are in a situation where their need for information is somehow lessened.

The college provides opportunities for students to acquire information, particularly through a mandatory college orientation course. For the drifters and dreamers, the mandatory student success course gave them opportunities to access information that they otherwise might not have received. Faculty, particularly developmental and general education course faculty, and classmates did not figure strongly in the students' narratives, although the literature suggests that strong faculty relationships and learning communities can improve community college student persistence, possibly through imparted information. For most of the students, placement in multiple developmental courses and other classes that did not carry a pre-requisite meant that they may not have taken any classes related to their intended degree or career path in their entire first year. Program faculty, such as the faculty advisor and the faculty member who connected one of the students with a physical therapy student, did emerge

as important sources information for those students. However, many students in the study had not taken a course in their major as of the time of their interview, so were cut off from a program or career perspective. The mix of students in the developmental and general education classes also pull from many majors, which may have contributed to classmates not rising as a source of information.

Subquestions to the first research question further explore student preferences and trust surrounding these information sources: *Why do they prefer some sources over others?* and *How do they assess the reliability of these sources?*

Issues of preferences for and reliability of information sources were not particularly salient in this study. In general, students did not actively select some sources over others; they took in the information as they encountered it. In a sense, students expressed their preference for mediated information by not using self-advising tools or other sources that would require a great deal of negotiation. Even the more active planners in this study did not privilege some sources above others as much as they tried to collect advice and guidance from many different sources.

Classmates were the main source of conversation around issues of reliability. Their potential function as a source of recommendations for instructors is seen as particularly dubious. The students who received or considered asking for recommendations felt that their classmates might have a different idea of what constitutes a “good” instructor and were therefore hesitant to use their advice. Since most students did not receive much college information from parents and relatives, there were no descriptions of a student finding parental advice more trustworthy than information from

the college. Overall, students found college sources of information reliable. The few exceptions arose mainly in the second interview from students who were misadvised. Unless given a reason not to trust institutional representatives, the students relied on these sources.

The second research question goes beyond merely accessing information to ask about students' perceptions and ability to apply that information, which proved to be a critical aspect of this research. *How do remedial community college students perceive and utilize college information?*

The students in this study knew that their remedial courses did not count towards their degrees, however, very few attempted to retest. Other students knew that tutoring was available, but did not take advantage of it, despite experiencing academic difficulty. As April says, "I know the information, it's just I don't do it." The ability to put knowledge to use presents a critical gap for these students.

Like many community colleges, MCC has a "one-stop" model of registration and financial aid, drop-in advising, tutoring, and multiple special programs for populations such as veterans. All of these services are made available and accessible for students and, to a large extent, the students in this study were aware of them. However, this buffet-style of services rewards the students who have an idea of what they need and, even more critically, feel entitled to use the help provided. In terms of this research, the planners had an advantage in navigating this self-serve environment.

The practice of MCC to have an advisor explain placement test results and their implications had a positive impact on students' understanding and is a good example of a

way in which information was presented to and interpreted for students rather than just made available to them. The students were clear that their developmental coursework did not count toward their degree programs, which was an information gap for students in previous studies. Faculty advisors and personnel of the college's mentoring and veteran's programs were also made available by the institution and utilized by students in the study. These guides were more successful in helping students to use information to strategize and plan.

In many ways, the role of the guides for the passenger students was to help students use information to create strategies and execute them. Many advisors and SCS instructors in the study gave students information and some even helped them interpret it, but it was really only the guides who assisted students in using the information to plan and create strategies. If more individualized assistance or clearer pathways are the keys to lifting students out of aimlessly drifting, how can community colleges effectively respond? I'll explore some implications for improving institutions' ability to assist students in strategically creating and following educational plans.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study suggests that community colleges have work to do with helping students follow through and apply the information that they receive. Interventions have to go beyond providing information to helping students to apply this information to make decisions. As Naffziger and Rosenbaum (2009) also found, "besides acquiring information, we find that they need more, including knowing what to do with information once they receive it" (p. 3-4). In making this observation, I realize that this is a very tall

order, but the college knowledge in and of itself is of limited use to students if they cannot use it to create strategies and concrete steps to achieve their goals.

In many ways, MCC's SCS class, like many orientation courses around the country, is designed to tackle just this problem. Although SCS was taken by all but one student in this sample, the students who craved information had the most positive reactions to it. Unfortunately, these are the same students who would have arguably received assistance without the course because they are already proactive in seeking guidance. Over half of the students had mixed or even negative reactions to the course. As Michael said in his interview, the one-on-one interaction is preferred for true advising, particularly during these first semesters before students are really in a program of study or on a transfer path. It is not surprising that what the students expressed as the most helpful aspect of the SCS course, the scheduling, was also the most individualized component of the class.

Perhaps the SCS course should be redesigned as a series of mandatory meetings throughout the semester with a dedicated advisor. The student could then see this advisor until entering a more well-defined program of study, rather than going from one advisor to the next, with little time to establish a rapport or to allow the advisor to get a better sense of the student's career and educational goals. The complexity of interaction between degree and transfer requirements also makes it difficult for the average SCS instructor to effectively advise the range of students in the class. Perhaps this is why two of the students were incorrectly advised in SCS and other students received conflicting guidance from advisors and SCS instructors.

Several students received conflicting advice from their advisors, SCS instructors, and faculty members, particularly in regard to pursuing a liberal studies transfer degree program versus a specialized program that would also transfer, such as business or exercise science. Until students choose a transfer destination, it is difficult to guide them to choose programs and courses that will meet multiple institutions' requirements. Unfortunately, other than work for more seamless articulations with four-year programs, there is little that community colleges can do to reduce the complexity of transfer requirements. The passengers and planners who had decided on their transfer destination faced less uncertainty. Having a four-year college in mind, even if not set in stone, makes pathways clearer for students. Although not all students plan on transferring, those who do would have been well-served if the SCS course incorporated that kind of information or if the students were encouraged to make that decision in their first semester and better supported to do so.

Establishing a transfer destination early can assist students in having clearer plans. Programs with more structure and less choice can serve the same purpose. In her study of community college programs, Nitecki (2009) suggests that the more structured occupational programs have higher retention rates in part because they offer fewer options and, therefore, fewer opportunities for students to get off-track. National policy groups such as Achieving the Dream and Completion by Design are advocating clearer pathways as part of the best practices they are sharing with state and institutional practitioners (Couturier, 2012). This study echoes these findings, with students who would otherwise be drifters finding surer footing through entering a structured program

or having a set transfer destination to guide course selection. Developmental education requirements remain a challenge, as they delay most of the students in this study from getting on these more structured pathways.

Learning how to register for courses is a college navigation skill that most students will eventually benefit from acquiring. However, depending on where students are in their developmental course sequence or what decisions they have made or are still making in regard to their degree program or transfer institution, it may not be appropriate for first-semester students to be self-sufficient in this area. If students are permitted to self-register, it is vital that registration systems possess basic safe guards to prevent students from self-enrolling in a course for which they do not meet the prerequisites.

An area of concern that is raised by this study is the advisors' overly cautious approach to remedial placement. In two cases, students who had placed out of developmental coursework ended up enrolling in remedial courses anyway; in one of these cases, the student's current reading teacher would have been a better judge of this need than an advisor or placement test score. Advisors should present developmental education in a non-stigmatizing way, but should also take care to provide encouragement and confidence to students who place into college level work. Using placement test scores as only one aspect of placement may assist more students from unnecessarily going through developmental coursework and many community colleges are adapting more holistic approaches to testing and placement. Since students who made it to their program of study courses could move into the passenger category, delaying this entry

even a semester due to an unnecessary developmental course requirement could also delay the student getting onto surer footing.

For developmental students, building tutoring or advising times into their schedule may help them to feel licensed to use these services by “placing the responsibility with the institutional actors (faculty, counselors, staff, administrators) rather than students, for proactively initiating various forms of contact” (Deil-Amen, 2011, p. 85). One of the drifters attended a mandatory supplemental instruction section that met after her accounting class twice a week, in the style of a recitation section. She describes supplemental instruction in this way: “It’s a little extra help, so it’s like, we do stuff all together type deal. So it’s not as bad, and we can work together on it.” This comment is particularly enlightening because the student chooses to highlight a group rather than individual approach to learning support. As noted in the literature review, many first-generation, working class students find interdependent environments more comfortable. Community colleges would do well to explore services that better match more of their students’ preferences, such as small group counseling, which combines the need for more individualized assistance with students’ preferences to feel part of a team.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

This study reinforces many researchers' observations that simply having the information is not enough; students need to be able to use information to create strategies and plans to reach their educational goals. In terms of cultural capital, as defined by Bourdieu and researchers that have extended his framework, some students possessed very little college know-how; others had the information but were unable to apply it to

themselves. Only three students in the study could be considered to both possess and activate this informational capital. The three planners used advisors and guides to get what they needed. In Bourdieu's terms, these students possess a habitus that helps them actively engage in this way.

Though there is disagreement over whether to study privileged cultural capital or to focus on the cultural capital that students bring in the community cultural wealth model, the fact remains that American institutions do require a certain amount of know-how. Students who are in possession of this privileged information have an advantage in this field. While it is preferable to examine and adjust institutional practices to lessen the need for college information, a long-term culture change is likely decades in the making. For now, a combination of providing students with information and making small adjustments to practice is more likely to assist students in removing informational barriers and making progress toward their educational goals.

Beyond adjusting practices to reduce information needs or “giving” students information that is privileged by the institution, another area of research examines equipping students with an understanding of the system of privilege that is at work. Stephens, Hamedani and Destin (2014) had first-year college students listen to advice from a panel senior students. The senior students who were first-generation students specifically talked about the challenges that accompany being the first individual in the family to attend college. First-year, first-generation students were then more likely to use college resources than first-generation students who did not attend or whose panel of senior students did not mention their first-generation backgrounds. “The intervention

provided students with the critical insight that people's different backgrounds matter and that people with backgrounds like theirs can succeed when they use the right kinds of tools and strategies" (p. 7).

This study also underlines the importance of viewing cultural or informational capital within the entire framework that Bourdieu describes, which includes the concepts of field and habitus. Since habitus has a large effect on students' ability to leverage any capital they possess, whether it is economic, cultural, or social, it is worthy of further attention and research. For all institutions of higher education, but particularly community colleges, how students approach services is likely to be defined by their class background. This interaction is a promising area of research, as it will assist institutions in better designing services to meet not just the needs of students, but also the ways in which students will be comfortable interacting with these resources.

### **Summary**

Community college students are more likely to need to work, to have children, to rely on public transportation, and to have geographical limitations placed on their higher education options. They are also more likely to be underprepared for college-level academic work. Given all the barriers that students face, it is frustrating but not surprising that community college persistence and graduation rates are low. Institutions can and do offer child care, assist with financial aid, and provide tutoring and other support services to help students overcome those barriers. Students need to know that these services exist in the first place and they need to know how to take advantage of them. The information barriers are less visible and more difficult to address, since they pervade all aspects of

college life. However, as the students in this study clearly exhibit, information (and, more importantly, the ability to use it) affects students' ability to plan and monitor their progress on those plans. Information and the ability to put it into practice can also assist students in utilizing the financial, social, and academic support services that college provide.

## REFERENCES

- Ahn, J. (2010). The role of social network locations in the college access mentoring of urban youth. *Education and Urban Society, 42*(7), 839-859.  
doi:10.1177/0013124510379825
- Alexander, K., Bozick, R., & Entwisle, D. (2008). Warming up, cooling out, or holding steady? Persistence and change in educational expectations after high school. *Sociology of Education, 81*(4), 371–396. doi:10.1177/003804070808100403
- American Association of Community Colleges. (2012). *Community college fact sheet*. Retrieved from <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Pages/fastfacts.aspx>
- Bahr, P. R. (2008). Cooling out in the community college: What is the effect of academic advising on students' chances of success? *Research in Higher Education, 49*(8), 704–732. doi:10.1007/s11162-008-9100-0
- Bahr, P. R. (2012). Deconstructing remediation in community colleges: Exploring association between course-taking patterns, course outcomes, and attrition from the remedial math and remedial writing sequences. *Research in Higher Education, 53*(6), 661-693. doi:10.1007/s11162-011-9243-2
- Bailey, T. (2009). Challenge and opportunity: Rethinking the role and function of developmental education in the community college. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 2009*(145), 11-30. doi:10.1002/cc.352
- Bailey, T., & Cho, S. W. (2010). *Developmental education in community colleges* [Research brief]. Available from the Community College Research Center website: <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/developmental-education-in->

community-colleges.html

- Barnes, R. A., & Piland, W. E. (2010-2011). Impact of learning communities in developmental English on community college student retention and persistence. *Journal of College Student Retention, 12*(1), 7-24. doi:10.2190/CS.12.1.b
- Barnett, E. A. (2011). Validation experiences and persistence among community college students. *The Review of Higher Education, 34*(2), 193–230. doi:10.1353/rhe.2010.0019
- Bell, A. D., Rowan-Kenyon, H. T., & Perna, L. W. (2009). College knowledge of 9th and 11th grade students: Variation by school and state context. *Journal of Higher Education, 80*(6), 663–685. doi:10.1353/jhe.0.0074
- Berger, J. B. (2000). Optimizing capital, social reproduction, and undergraduate persistence: A sociological perspective. In J. M. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp. 95–124). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Bers, T. (2005). Parents of traditionally aged community college students: Communications and choice. *Research in Higher Education, 46*(4), 413–436. doi:10.1007/s11162-005-2968-z
- Bers, T. H., & Smith, K. E. (1991). Persistence of community college students: The influence of student intent and academic and social integration. *Research in Higher Education, 32*(5), 539–556. doi:10.1007/BF00992627
- Bloom, J. (2007). (Mis) reading social class in the journey towards college: Youth development in urban America. *Teachers College Record, 109*(2), 343–368.

- Borglum, K., & Kubala, T. (2000). Academic and social integration of community college students: A case study. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 24(7), 567–576. doi:10.1080/10668920050139712
- Bourdieu, P. (1997). The forms of capital. In A. H. Halsey, H. Lauder, P. Brown, & A. S. Wells (Eds.), *Education: Culture, economy and society* (pp. 46–58). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1986)
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (2011). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Press. (Original work published 1976)
- Brint, S., & Karabel, J. (1989). *The diverted dream: Community colleges and the promise of educational opportunity in America, 1900-1985*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Calcagno, J. C., Crosta, P., Bailey, T., & Jenkins, D. (2007). Stepping stones to a degree: The impact of enrollment pathways and milestones on community college student outcomes. *Research in Higher Education*, 48(7), 775–801. doi:10.1007/s11162-007-9053-8
- Callahan, M. K., & Chumney, D. (2009). “Write like college”: How remedial writing courses at a community college and a research university position “at-risk” students in the field of higher education. *Teachers College Record*, 111(7), 1619–1664.

- Charmaz, K. (2005). Grounded theory in the 21st century: Applications for advancing social justice studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 507-535). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Choy, S. P., Horn, L. J., Nunez, A.-M., & Chen, X. (2000). Transition to college: What helps at-risk students and students whose parents did not attend college. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2000(107), 45-63. doi:10.1002/ir.10704
- Clark, B. R. (1960). *The open door college: A case study*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Collier, P. J., & Morgan, D. L. (2007). "Is that paper really due today?": Differences in first-generation and traditional college students' understandings of faculty expectations. *Higher Education*, 55(4), 425-446. doi:10.1007/s10734-007-9065-5
- Courturier, L. K. (2012, Dec.). *Cornerstones of completion: State policy support for accelerated, structured pathways to college credentials and transfer*. Available from the Jobs for the Future website:  
[http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/publications/CBD\\_CornerstonesOfCompletion\\_111612.pdf](http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/publications/CBD_CornerstonesOfCompletion_111612.pdf)
- Deil-Amen, R. (2005). Do traditional models of college dropout apply to non-traditional students at non-traditional colleges? Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Philadelphia, PA.
- Deil-Amen, R. (2007). When aspirations meet reality for low-income minority high school students in their transition to college. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, New York.
- Deil-Amen, R. (2011). Socio-academic integrative moments: Rethinking academic and

- social integration among two-year college students in career-related programs. *Journal of Higher Education*, 82(1), 54-91. doi:10.1353/jhe.2011.0006
- Deil-Amen, R., & DeLuca, S. (2010). The underserved third: How our educational structures populate an educational underclass. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 15(1), 27–50. doi:10.1080/10824661003634948
- Deil-Amen, R., & Rosenbaum, J. E. (2002). The unintended consequences of stigma-free remediation. *Sociology of Education*, 75(3), 249–68.
- Devine, F. (2004). *Class practices: How parents help their children get good jobs*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- DiMaggio, P. (1982). Cultural capital and school success: The impact of status culture participation on the grades of U.S. high school students. *American Sociological Review*, 47(2), 189–201. doi:10.2307/2094962
- DiMaggio, P., & Mohr, J. (1985). Cultural capital, educational attainment, and marital selection. *American Journal of Sociology*, 90(6), 1231–1261.
- Dougherty, K. J. (1994). *The contradictory college: The conflicting origins, impacts, and futures of the community college*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Dougherty, K., & Townsend, B. K. (2006). Community college missions: A theoretical and historical perspective. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2006(136), 5-13. doi:10.1002/cc.254
- Dumais, S. A., & Ward, A. (2010). Cultural capital and first-generation college success. *Poetics*, 38(3), 245–265. doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2009.11.011

- Farkas, G., Grobe, R. P., Sheehan, D., & Shuan, Y. (1990). Cultural resources and school success: Gender, ethnicity, and poverty groups within an urban school district. *American Sociological Review*, *55*(1), 127–142. doi:10.2307/2095708
- Fay, M. P., Bickerstaff, S., & Hodara, M. (2013). *Why students do not prepare for math placement exams: Student perspectives*. [CCRC Brief No. 57]. Available from the Community College Research Center website:  
<http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/why-students-do-not-prepare.html>
- Given, L. M. (2002). The academic and the everyday: Investigating the overlap in mature undergraduates' information-seeking behaviors. *Library & Information Science Research*, *24*(1), 17–29. doi:16/S0740-8188(01)00102-5
- Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Goble, L. J., Rosenbaum, J. E., & Stephan, J. L. (2008). Do institutional attributes predict individuals' degree success at two-year colleges? *New Directions for Community Colleges*, *2008*(144), 63–72. doi:10.1002/cc.346
- Goldrick-Rab, S. (2007). What higher education has to say about the transition to college. *Teachers College Record*, *109*(10), 2444–2481.
- Goyette, K. A. (2008). College for some to college for all: Social background, occupational expectations, and educational expectations over time. *Social Science Research*, *37*(2), 461–484. doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2008.02.002
- Grubb, W. N. (2001). *“Getting into the world”: Guidance and counseling in community colleges*. Available from the Community College Research Center website:

<http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/getting-into-the-world.html>

- Hagedorn, L. S. (2010). The pursuit of student success: The directions and challenges facing community colleges. *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 25, pp. 181–218). New York, NY: Springer.
- Hawley, T. H., & Harris, T. A. (2006). Student characteristics related to persistence for first-year community college students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 7(1), 117–142. doi:10.2190/E99D-V4NT-71VF-83DC
- Heverly, M. A. (1999). Predicting retention from students' experiences with college processes. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 1(1), 3–11. doi:10.2190/C1MB-YP0J-UHJ0-MGMB
- Horvat, E. M. (2001). Understanding equity and access in higher education: The potential contribution of Pierre Bourdieu. In J. C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 16, pp. 195–238). New York, NY: Agathon Press.
- Ingells, S. J., Glennie, E., & Lauff, E. (2012, July). *Trends among young adults over three decades, 1974-2006*. Retrieved from:  
<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2012345>
- Jacobson, L., & Mokher, C. (2009, January). *Pathways to boosting the earning of low-income students by increasing their educational attainment*. Retrieved from Hudson Institute Center for Employment Policy website:  
<http://www.hudson.org/files/publications/Pathways%20to%20Boosting.pdf>

- Jaeger, M. M. (2009). Equal access but unequal outcomes: Cultural capital and educational choice in a meritocratic society. *Social Forces*, 87(4), 1943–1972. doi:10.1353/sof.0.0192
- Jenkins, D. (2006). *What community college management practices are effective in promoting student success?: A study of high- and low-impact institutions* [paper]. Available from the Community College Research Center website: <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/community-college-management-practices.html>
- Jenkins, D., & Cho, S.-W. (2012, January). *Get with the program: Accelerating community college students' entry into and completion of programs of study* [CCRC Working Paper No. 32]. Available from the Community College Research Center website: <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/get-with-the-program.html>
- Kalmijn, M., & Kraaykamp, G. (1996). Race, cultural capital, and schooling: An analysis of trends in the United States. *Sociology of Education*, 69(1), 22–34. doi:10.2307/2112721
- Karabel, J. (1972). Community colleges and social stratification. *Harvard Educational Review*, 42, 521-562.
- Karp, M. M., & Hughes, K. L. (2008). Information networks and integration: Institutional influences on experiences and persistence of beginning students. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2008(144), 73–82. doi:10.1002/cc.347
- Karp, M. M., Hughes, K. L., & O’Gara, L. (2011). An exploration of Tinto’s integration

- framework for community college students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 12(1), 69–86. doi:10.2190/CS.12.1.e
- Kingston, P. W. (2001). The unfulfilled promise of cultural capital theory. *Sociology of Education*, 74(4), 88–99. doi:10.2307/2673255
- Kuh, G. D., & Love, P. G. (2000). A cultural perspective on student departure. In J. M. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp. 213–234). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Lamont, M., & Lareau, A. (1988). Cultural capital: Allusions, gaps and glissandos in recent theoretical developments. *Sociological Theory*, 6(2), 153–168.  
doi:10.2307/202113
- Lareau, A. (1987). Social class differences in family-school relationships: The importance of cultural capital. *Sociology of Education*, 60(2), 73–85. doi:10.2307/2112583
- Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race and family life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lareau, A., & Horvat, E. M. (1999). Moments of social inclusion and exclusion race, class, and cultural capital in family-school relationships. *Sociology of Education*, 72(1), 37–53. doi:10.2307/2673185
- Lareau, A., & Weininger, E. B. (2003). Cultural capital in educational research: A critical assessment. *Theory and Society*, 32(5/6), 567–606.  
doi:10.1023/B:RYSO.0000004951.04408.b0
- Lin, N. (1999). Social networks and status attainment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25, 467–487. doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.25.1.467

- Lin, N. (2001). Building a social network theory of social capital. In N. Lin, K. Cook, & R. S. Burt (Eds.), *Social capital: Theory and research* (pp. 3-29). New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Liou, D. D., Antrop-Gonzalez, R., & Cooper, R. (2009). Unveiling the promise of community cultural wealth to sustaining Latina/o students' college-going information networks. *Educational Studies: Journal of the American Educational Studies Association*, 45(6), 534–555. doi:10.1080/00131940903311347
- Makela, J. P. (2006, June). Advising community college students: Exploring traditional and emerging theory. Champaign, IL: Office of Community College Research and Leadership. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED495222)
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Maxwell, W. E. (2000). Student peer relations at a community college. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 24(3), 207–217.  
doi:10.1080/106689200264169
- McDonough, P. (1997). *Choosing colleges: How social class and schools structure opportunity*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Merriam, S. B. (2002). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. The Jossey-Bass higher and adult education series (1st ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Montgomery, J. C., Jeffs, M., Schlegel, J., & Jones, T. (2009). The first year introduction program as a predictor of student academic performance. *Journal of Applied*

*Research in the Community College*, 17(1), 60–64.

Moore, R. (2008). Capital. In M. Grenfell (Ed.), *Pierre Bourdieu : Key concepts* (pp. 101–117). Stocksfield, UK: Acumen.

Morest, V. S. (2006). Double vision: How the attempt to balance multiple missions is shaping the future of community colleges. In T. W. Bailey & V. S. Morest (Eds.), *Defending the community college equity agenda*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Morest, V. S. (2013). From access to opportunity: The evolving social roles of community colleges. *The American Sociologist*, 44(4), 319-328.  
doi:10.1007/s12108-013-9194-5

Musoba, G., & Baez, B. (2009). The cultural capital of cultural and social capital: Economy of translations. In J. C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 24). New York, NY: Springer.

Naffziger, M., & Rosenbaum, J. (2009). Information is not enough: Cultural capital, cultural capital translators, and college access for disadvantaged students. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco, CA.

National Center for Educational Statistics. (2010, September 7). Web tables - Profile of undergraduate students 2007-08. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2010205>

Nitecki, E. M. (2009). *Heating up and cooling out at the community college: The potential of student-faculty interactions to contribute to student aspiration*

(Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Temple University Electronic Theses and Dissertations.

- Nora, A. (2004). The role of habitus and cultural capital in choosing a college, transitioning from high school to higher education, and persisting in college among minority and nonminority students. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 3*(2), 180–208. doi:10.1177/1538192704263189
- O’Gara, L., Karp, M. M., & Hughes, K. L. (2009). Student success courses in the community college: An exploratory study of student perspectives. *Community College Review, 36*(3), 195–218. doi:10.1177/0091552108327186
- Oyserman, D., Johnson, E., & James, L. (2011). Seeing the destination but not the path: Effects of socioeconomic disadvantage on school-focused possible self content and linked behavioral strategies. *Self and Identity, 10*(4), 474–492. doi:10.1080/15298868.2010.487651
- Pascarella, E. T., Wolniak, G. C., Pierson, C. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2003). Experiences and outcomes of first-generation students in community colleges. *Journal of College Student Development, 44*(3), 420–429. doi:10.1353/csd.2003.0030
- Person, A. E., Rosenbaum, J. E., & Deil-Amen, R. (2006). Student planning and information problems in different college structures. *Teachers College Record, 108*(3), 374–396.
- Provasnik, S., & Planty, M. (2008, August 20). *Community colleges: Special supplement to The 2008 Condition of Education*. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2008033>

- Reay, D. (2004). Education and cultural capital: The implications of changing trends in education policies. *Cultural Trends*, 13(2), 73-86.  
doi:10.1080/0954896042000267161
- Reay, D., David, M. E., & Ball, S. (2005). *Degrees of choice: Social class, race, and gender in higher education*. Stoke-on-Trent, UK: Trentham Books.
- Robbins, D. (2008). Theory of practice. In M. Grenfell (Ed.), *Pierre Bourdieu: Key concepts*. Stocksfield, UK: Acumen.
- Rosenbaum, J., Deil-Amen, R., & Person, A. E. (2006). *After admission: From college access to college success*. New York, NY: R. Sage Foundation.
- Safran, S., & Visher, M. G. (2010). *Case studies of three community colleges: The policy and practice of assessing and placing students in developmental education courses*. National Center for Postsecondary Research. Retrieved from <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/548/abstract.html>
- Savolainen, R. (2005). Everyday life information seeking. In K. E. Fisher, S. Erdelez, & L. E. F. McKechnie (Eds.), *Theories of information behavior*. Medford, NJ: Information Today.
- Schneider, B. L., & Stevenson, D. (1999). *The ambitious generation: America's teenagers, motivated but directionless*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Scott-Clayton, J. (2011). *The shapeless river: Does a lack of structure inhibit students' progress at community colleges?* [Working Paper No. 25]. Available from the Community College Research Center website:  
<http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/lack-of-structure-students-progress.html>

- Sparks, D., & Malkus, N. (2013, January). *First-year undergraduate remedial coursetaking: 1999-2000, 2003-04, 2007-08* [Statistics in Brief]. Retrieved from the National Center for Education Statistics website:  
<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013013.pdf>
- Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (1997). A social capital framework for understanding the socialization of racial minority children and youths. *Harvard Educational Review*, 67(1), 1–41.
- Stanton-Salazar, R. D., & Dornbusch, S. M. (1995). Social capital and the reproduction of inequality: Information networks among Mexican-origin high school students. *Sociology of Education*, 68(2), 116–135.
- Stephens, N. M., Fryberg, S. A., Markus, H. R., Johnson, C. S., & Covarrubius, R. (2012). Unseen disadvantage: How American universities' focus on independence undermines the academic performance of first-generation college students. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(6), 1178-1197.  
doi:10.1037/a0027143
- Stephens, N. M., Hamedani, M. G., & Destin, M. (2014). Closing the social-class achievement gap: A difference-education intervention improves first-generation students' academic performance and all students' college transition. *Psychological Science*, doi: 10.1177/0956797613518349
- Sullivan, A. (2001). Cultural capital and educational attainment. *Sociology*, 35(4), 893–912. doi:10.1177/0038038501035004006

- Tierney, W. G. (1999). Models of minority college-going and retention: Cultural integrity versus cultural suicide. *The Journal of Negro Education, 68*(1), 80–91.  
doi:10.2307/2668211
- Tierney, W. G. (2000). Power, identity, and the dilemma of college student departure. In J. M. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp. 213–234). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Tierney, W. G. (2009). Applying to college. *Qualitative Inquiry, 15*(1), 79–95.  
doi:10.1177/1077800408325329
- Tierney, W. G., & Venegas, K. M. (2009). Finding money on the table: Information, financial aid, and access to college. *The Journal of Higher Education, 80*(4), 363–388. doi:10.1353/jhe.0.0059
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (2009). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Vargas, J. H. (2004). *College knowledge: Addressing information barriers to college*. The Education Resources Institute. Retrieved from <http://174.133.199.34/pdf/research-studies/CollegeKnowledge.pdf>
- Walpole, M., McDonough, P. M., Bauer, C. J., Gibson, C., Kanyi, K., & Toliver, R. (2005). This test is unfair. *Urban Education, 40*(3), 321–349.  
doi:10.1177/0042085905274536
- Walters, E. W. (2003). Editor's choice: Becoming student centered via the one-stop shop

initiative. *Community College Review*, 31(3), 40-54.

doi:10.1177/009155210303100303

Wathington, H. D., Pretlow, J., & Mitchell, C. (2010-2011). The difference a cohort makes: Understanding developmental learning communities in community colleges. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 12(2), 7-24.

Wells, R. (2008). The effects of social and cultural capital on student persistence: Are community colleges more meritocratic? *Community College Review*, 36(1), 25–46. doi:10.1177/0091552108319604

Wells, R. (2009). Social and cultural capital, race and ethnicity, and college student retention. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 10(2), 103–128.

Widén-Wulff, G., Ek, S., Ginman, M., Perttilä, R., Södergård, P., & Tötterman, A. K. (2008). Information behaviour meets social capital: A conceptual model. *Journal of Information Science*, 34(3), 346–355. doi:10.1177/0165551507084679

Winkle-Wagner, R. (2010). Cultural capital: The promises and pitfalls in education research. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 36(1), 1–144. doi:10.1002/aehe.3601

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods*. 4th. ed. Applied Social Research Methods Series. Vol. 5. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Zeidenberg, M., Jenkins, D., & Calcagno, J. C. (2007). *Do student success courses actually help community college students succeed?* [CCRC Brief No. 36]. Available from the Community College Research Center website:

<http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/student-success-courses-help.html>

Zeidner, T. (2006). Information and access: Modeling the nexus of the academic preparation and financial aid literatures. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 81(4), 118–138. doi:10.1207/s15327930pje8104\_6

**APPENDICES**

- A. Qualifying Survey
- B. Interview Protocol: Fall Semester
- C. Data Analysis Codes

**APPENDIX A**  
**QUALIFYING SURVEY**

Dear student,

You are being invited to participate in a study of community college students and college information. If you qualify and are chosen, you will be asked to participate in an interview that would last approximately one hour. Interviewees will receive a \$15 gift certificate. There is no penalty if you choose not to participate in this survey or the study. If you are interested in being considered for inclusion in this study, please answer the questions below and on the reverse.

Are you 18 years of age or older? \_\_\_\_ yes \_\_\_\_ no

Is this your first semester in college (including other colleges)? \_\_\_\_ yes \_\_\_\_ no

How many classes are you taking this semester? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your gender? \_\_\_\_\_ What is your race/ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the highest educational level of your parent or guardian?

\_\_\_ High School or Less \_\_\_ Some College \_\_\_ College Degree \_\_\_ Don't Know/NA

What is the highest educational level of your other parent or guardian, if applicable?

\_\_\_ High School or Less \_\_\_ Some College \_\_\_ College Degree \_\_\_ Don't Know/NA

Please provide your name and an email address or phone number where you can best be reached if you are chosen for this study.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ I prefer to be contacted by:

\_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Text message: \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Phone call: \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your time.

## APPENDIX B

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: FALL SEMESTER

Interview Question	Goals/Aims of Question
Can you tell me a little about how you came to take classes here at the College? What was the process? When did all of this happen?	Introductory question – allow students to talk, become comfortable and tell their story. Listen for emotional cues about the process of applying, placement testing, and choosing courses.
What courses are you taking this semester? How many credits?	Note how many developmental courses and if student is in the SCS class. Does she know the exact courses? (ie. Western Civ I rather than “a history class”) – probe to be sure. Does she know how many credits?
How did you find the information about what classes to take?	Is the student working from an academic plan? Was she advised? Use the website? Advice from a friend?
<p><i>If student met with an advisor:</i></p> <p>How did you know to meet with an advisor?            What was that like?            What kinds of things did you talk about?            How did you feel when you left the advisor's office?</p>	Probing for more in-depth information
Would you say you were more anxious or more confident when you were choosing courses? Why?	How does the student feel about the process – locus of control issues
How is this process different from your high school experience in choosing courses?	Comparing and contrasting previous with current experience
Are you going to take classes next semester? How did/will you decide what classes to take?	Might previous experience affect future behavior?
Do you ever ask other students in your classes about which courses or which professors to take?	Informal vs. formal sources of information - student may not think of other students as sources of information because they are not "official"

How long do you think you'll take classes here at the College?	Long term planning – is the aim to transfer without completing a degree or to complete a degree and transfer or to complete a degree? Does their estimate match a possible time frame?
<i>If student intends to complete a degree:</i>	
Why did you choose to pursue this program?	
Is your program strict or more flexible? What makes you say that?	What is their attitude regarding requirements?
<i>If student intends to transfer:</i>	
What kind of information would a student need if he or she wanted to transfer?	Merriam's Hypothetical Question
Is there a particular school or schools that you would like to transfer to? IF YES: What makes you chose x/y/z? IF NO: How will you decide? What are the factors?	
Do you work? How many hours/week? Brothers or sisters attended/ing college? Parents attended/ing college?	Demographics
Is there anything else about college processes and procedures that we didn't discuss that you think I should know?	Student-identified gaps

**APPENDIX C**  
**DATA ANALYSIS CODES**

**{code}** description of code

---

**{classes\_fall}** what classes is he/she taking in fall of study?

**{classes\_social}** talking about classes being social

**{classes\_spring}** courses planning to take in the spring

**{college\_resources>do\_not\_use>do\_not\_need}** doesn't need tutoring yet, so does not go

**{college\_resources>do\_not\_use>does\_not\_know}** doesn't use a college resource because not aware of it

**{college\_resources>do\_not\_use>independence}** does not use college resources because feels like he/she wants to do for him/herself

**{college\_resources>do\_not\_use>time}** does not use resources due to time

**{college\_resources>do\_not\_use>tried\_and\_disliked}** does not use college resource b/c had tried and found them confusing or not helpful

**{college\_resources>uses}** uses college resources

**{comparison>four\_year}** compares their experience at the community college with information they are receiving from friends about a four-year school

**{comparison>hs>better}** better at college than at high school

**{comparison>hs>harder}** college is harder than hs

**{comparison>hs>same}** makes a comparison to high school, indicates that the experience is similar

**{comparison>last\_semester>harder}** school is harder this semester

**{comparison>last\_semester>less\_social}** compared to last semester, the classes are less social

**{comparison>other\_two\_year}** make a comparison to a different two-year school

{**confusion**} expresses uncertainty or confusion about a process

{**delaying\_seeking\_info**} knows s/he needs to know something, but has not looked into it yet

{**expectations**} did college meet expectations?

{**FGS**} first-generation college student

{**firstday**} describing the first day came to campus

{**gender**} gender

{**graduate**} discussing any plans regarding graduation –ie. first before transfer?

{**independence**} demonstrated proactivity or independence in seeking information

{**information>did\_not\_use**} didn't use received information

{**information>location**} information from a non-personal/individual source

{**information>location>email\_letter**} receives information from emails or letters

{**information>location>high\_school\_visit**} got information on visit with high school

{**information>location>paper**} printed out information, such as an advising sheet

{**information>location>website**} found information on the website

{**information>location>website>misinformation**} found incorrect information on a website

{**information>person>advisor**} received information from advisor

{**information>person>advisor>misinformation**} told the wrong thing by an advisor

{**information>person>army\_advisor**} received information from a resource in the military

{**information>person>classmate**} receives information from classmates

{**information>person>classmate>negative**} indicates that they do not receive information from classmates

{**information>person>co\_worker**} receives information from coworker

**{information>person>co\_worker>negative}** did not receive information from coworker

**{information>person>coach}** received information from coach

**{information>person>college\_employee}** received information from a college employee (disabilities, admissions, etc.)

**{information>person>friend}** received information from friend

**{information>person>friend>misinformation}** misinformation from a friend

**{information>person>friend>negative}** does not receive information from friend

**{information>person>hs\_advisor}** received information from a high school guidance counselor or advisor

**{information>person>instructor}** receives or seeks information from professor

**{information>person>instructor>negative}** does not receive information from instructor

**{information>person>MMMP\_advisor}** received information from an advisor in the minority male mentoring program

**{information>person>other\_college\_rep}** received information from an admissions person, faculty member, or advisor at another institution

**{information>person>parent}** received information from a parent

**{information>person>parent\_connection}** receives information from a family friend or someone connected through a parent

**{information>person>peer}** received information from a classmate/acquaintance

**{information>person>relative}** receives information from a relative

**{information>person>relative>misinformation}** steered wrong by relatives

**{information>person>scs}** information from the scs instructor/advisor

**{information>person>scs>misinformation}** received misinformation from scs instructor/advisor

**{information>person>tutor}** received information from a tutor

**{information>person>vet\_advisor}** received information for the Veteran's advisor

**{information>rumor}** heard "somewhere," unidentified or "Just around"

**{length\_of\_stay}** how long do they plan to be at MCC?

**{looked\_other\_schools}** did the student consider other schools?

**{major}** talking about a major

**{mediation>parent}** information acquisition mediated by a parent

**{misinformation}** demonstrates lack of understanding or misinformation

**{others\_dropping>do\_not\_value}** hypothesizes that others drop out because they do not see the value in education

**{others\_dropping>goal\_changes}** hypothesis for other students dropping out is due to a change in goals or career plans

**{others\_dropping>immature}** hypothesis for others dropping out is their immaturity or lack of independence

**{others\_dropping>not\_what\_expect}** hypothesis for others dropping out is because it is not what the students expected

**{others\_dropping>too\_difficult}** hypothesis that others drop out because it is too difficult, trying to do too much

**{parent\_support}** when discussing one or both parents as supportive

**{parent\_support>lacking}** lacking parental support

**{personal\_connection\_school}** indicates that they had relatives/friends who had previously attended mcc

**{race}** self-identified race

**{reason\_for\_coming>affordable}** came to MCC because affordable

**{reason\_for\_coming>explore}** came to MCC to explore options

**{reason\_for\_coming>location>close}** came to MCC because the college is close to work/home/family etc

**{reason\_for\_coming>location>far}** came to MCC to escape a nearby school - usually because it's more peaceful and to escape distractions

{**reason\_for\_coming>personal\_connection**} came to MCC because knew someone here

{**reason\_for\_coming>prepare**} came to MCC first because felt unprepared for four-year

{**reason\_for\_coming>quality**} came to MCC because good quality

{**regret**} wish I had...

{**remedial**} describing way of thinking about remedial/developmental work

{**scs>attitude>negative**} the attitude of other students toward scs is negative

{**scs>attitude>positive**} other students in the class have a positive attitude

{**scs>easy**} indicates that the scs course is easy

{**scs>helpful**} indicates that part of scs is helpful

{**scs>negative**} student's own opinion of scs is negative

{**scs>understanding\_of\_purpose**} the student describes his or her understanding of the purpose of the scs class

{**strategy**} describes developing or employing a strategy

{**strategy>career**} employs a strategy regarding preparation for career

{**strategy>information**} has a strategy for obtaining information from an advisor or college rep

{**strategy>schedule**} exhibits a strategy in scheduling of courses or balancing courses and work - either in the course of the day or in composing a schedule balance of major and gened classes

{**strategy>study**} employs a study strategy

{**strategy>success**} demonstrates a strategy to be successful in school

{**strategy>transfer**} strategy transfer

{**stress**} things the student is finding stressful. what he/she is worried about

{**stress>geneds**} stress due to general education courses

{**stress>major**} stress due to major

**{test\_prep}** did the student prepare for the placement test? know that they could?

**{transfer}** talking about transfer schools - not information about them

**{work}** describing work – where, hours, etc.