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**SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN THE NEW ENGLAND COMMUNITY
COLLEGE SYSTEM: A CRITICAL CULTURAL STUDIES
PERSPECTIVE**

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SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN THE NEW ENGLAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM:
A CRITICAL CULTURAL STUDIES PERSPECTIVE

A Thesis Presented

by

SARAH R. MARMON

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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Communication

SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN THE NEW ENGLAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM:
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ABSTRACT

SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN THE NEW ENGLAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM: A CRITICAL CULTURAL STUDIES PERSPECTIVE

SEPTEMBER 2017

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Statistical data on community colleges confirms how vast the community college institution is: Serving 46% of *all* undergraduates in the country, or 12.4 million students. A large body of literature exists on the specifics of social reproduction in four-year universities; as well as the specifics of social reproduction in racially and economically segregated high schools. However, there exists a blind spot in this literature when it comes to social reproduction at the community college.

Through conducting interviews with students, faculty and staff at three local community colleges, this ethnographic study explores this theoretical and empirical blind spot by using a critical cultural studies perspective on social reproduction, asking questions around community college students' experiences on three levels: students themselves, the institutional level through administration and governance; and, lastly, the communication strategy of the community college.

Community colleges largely serve working class students, immigrants and older learners. They are the embodiment of the classic American dream that social mobility is possible through a democratic and public education system that allows anyone to 'work their way up.' On the other hand, they can work to funnel students too quickly into vocational tracks that foreclose the possibility of a higher-prestige, and higher-earning, bachelor's degree. Community colleges straddle this tension between upward social mobility and class reproduction, as well as institutional tensions produced by needing to adapt to pervasive neoliberal logic. Student interviews highlight the ways their educational experiences are shaped by these tensions, given the community college's unique structural education within higher education, and how these tensions can work to foreclose or open their future education possibilities.

This thesis also explores the following themes: the community college's positioning relative to public state schools and elite private schools; community college governance; workforce changes among faculty and staff and its effect on students; political implications of the community college education model; and, more broadly, understanding the place of public education in a wider neoliberal sociopolitical context.

KEYWORDS: community college, social reproduction, education, inequality, neoliberalism, critical cultural studies

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION:

WHY STUDY COMMUNITY COLLEGES?

“...There is a moment – and it only needs to be this for the gates to shut on the future – in working class culture when the manual giving of labour power represents both a freedom, election and transcendence, and a precise insertion into a system of exploitation and oppression for working class people. The former promises the future, the latter shows the present. It is the future in the present which hammers freedom to inequality in the reality of contemporary capitalism.”
(Paul Willis 1977: 120)

Critical cultural studies offers an analytical space capable of bearing the contradictions of social life. Places, people and political configurations that are in-between, constantly shifting, happening in the ‘Border Countries’ and other liminal spaces – the ‘matter-out-of-place.’ Stuart Hall describes this double-vision in his autobiography:

I could negotiate [England] as a ‘familiar stranger’ . . . I know both places intimately, but I am not wholly of either place. And that’s exactly the diasporic experience, far away enough to experience the sense of exile and loss, close enough to understand the enigma of an always-postponed arrival.¹

This thesis will argue that the analytical space possible through the Birmingham perspective of cultural studies is uniquely suited to studying the modern-day American community college, an institution critically important to the lives of the working class and students of color. Not only important for the type of ‘freedom’ it represents to students themselves, but also for its institutional and cultural workings, which largely work to secure current levels of inequality and segregation in higher education and the labor market. Known as the ‘contradictory college’ among education scholars, its effects and outcomes on students’ trajectories has been studied extensively in policy, education, economic, and social science fields – however, across fields, the question asked of community colleges remains the same. The contradictory college’s significance and complexity have been overshadowed by an entrenched, decades-long ‘yes-or-no’ style debate: Do they, or do they not, contribute to social reproduction? Do students, ultimately, fare better or worse in economic terms? The research that ensues is

¹ Hall, Stuart, “The Formation of a diasporic intellectual: an interview with Stuart Hall by Kuan-Hsing Chen,” in *Critical Dialogues* (1996): pg. 490

attempting, perhaps, to capture the “always-postponed arrival” of the community college student in quantitative terms, a framing that misses a central cultural dynamic to social reproduction in the community college case – one of simultaneous ‘freedom’ and ‘exploitation.’

Central to this paper will be the interviews of a sample of students’ perspectives about their own education – their thoughts and experiences at their community college. These perspectives will be used neither to illustrate pre-figured theories nor to confirm facts from the literature, but as a springboard for a questioning and opening up of the ‘contradictory college’ debate in cultural studies terms, that is, not strictly whether CC’s reproduce inequality but how culture and structure, meaning and action, interplay in locally-unique ways to produce the contradictory experiences of social mobility and inequality lived out by students.

A. Research Questions and Purpose of Study

Statistical data on community colleges confirms how vast the community college institution is: Serving 46% of *all* undergraduates in the country, or 12.4 million students.² Data from the American Association of Community Colleges also confirms the diversity among community college goers: 36% identify as “first-generation,” a designation denoting first-in-family to attend college; and 61% are part-time students who work full-time.³ Racially, this diversity holds: of *all* undergraduates in the country, 61% of Native American students, 57% of Hispanic students, 52% of black students, and 47% of Asian/Pacific Islander are at community colleges.⁴ A large body of literature exists on the specifics of social reproduction in four-year universities; as well as the specifics of social reproduction in racially- and economically-segregated high schools. However, there exists a blind-spot in this literature when it comes to the middle step that the community college represents for almost half of the nation’s college-goers.

This thesis aims to explore that blind-spot by using a critical cultural studies perspective on social reproduction, specifically Paul Willis’ *Learning to Labor*, his ethnographic work on the

² American Association of Community Colleges, 2016 Fact Sheet:
<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/AACCFactSheetsR2.pdf>

³ American Association of Community Colleges, 2016 Fact Sheet:
<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/AACCFactSheetsR2.pdf>

⁴ American Association of Community Colleges, 2016 Fact Sheet:
<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/AACCFactSheetsR2.pdf>

contradictory experience of social reproduction in a group of British working-class boys. I have aimed to construct a partially-ethnographic study, composed of differing qualitative data sources, to ask questions of students' experiences at the community college on three levels: students themselves, the administrative level, and the communication strategy of the community college (marketing messages used to communicate to students why they should enroll at the particular community college, and what options they will have open to them there). These types of data are neither exhaustive nor thorough enough to constitute a full ethnographic analysis on the scale of Paul Willis' work, rather they offer additional layers of complexity to the student interviews themselves and allow me to analyze deeper meanings being created around what it means to attend the institution, as well as political and economic pressures as offered by the administrative-level data. The data collection takes place at three Massachusetts community colleges, which will be described in detail in the next section.

The primary research questions of this study are:

- 1) In what ways do community colleges facilitate simultaneous (versus 'either-or') social reproduction and social mobility, and how is it experienced by students?
- 2) How do community colleges represent the potential for students' social mobility through their public communication? What aspects of social mobility do these materials and narratives focus on?
- 3) How do current community college students interpret their possible future opportunities in light of the above two aspects? What are the perceived benefits and limitations of a CC education according to students' perspectives?

B. Case Study Profiles:
Holyoke Community College, Springfield Technical Community College,
Greenfield Community College

The three community colleges used for data collection were chosen due to 1) proximity to the researcher's location in Hampshire County, MA, and 2) their differing origins, populations served and educational functions. Three institutions were chosen for comparative purposes. The Northeast is a particularly auspicious place to study community colleges in the higher education landscape: it is where the first colonial higher education institutions were established, and

Massachusetts in particular was home to the first land-grant universities.⁵ Today, the Northeast boasts the highest concentration of universities per capita (Boston itself takes the title of American city with most colleges, with upwards of 12), many of them considering themselves “elite”; and though it is the smallest region in the country, it has the highest concentration of wealth in the country.⁶ It is this emphasis on elite higher education in the region that makes the community college’s place even more stark: Massachusetts comprises 15 community college campuses and 25 four-year universities.⁷

Why are community colleges established in a particular area? Kevin Dougherty’s *Contradictory College* maintains that the origins of community colleges must be studied on three levels of government: national, state, and local.⁸ In addition, business interests (always acting in partner with local government officials) play a key role in deciding where a community college is established, and what particular education functions it is to fulfill.⁹ Once CC’s are established, they are continually reshaped – both expanded in certain areas and contracted in others – as pressure of economy, politics and enrollment demand change. When studying the origins and continuous reshaping of the three community colleges used in this study, the tight relationship between business and government is clearly illustrated. For a recent example, Governor Charlie Baker, Education Secretary Jim Peyser, Labor and Workforce Development Secretary Ron Walker visited Holyoke Community College to announce the granting of a \$2.5 million grant for “specific capital projects,” as well as campus renovation. However, while the grant was purportedly for campus renovation, the focus on workforce and business needs was a dominant theme in the announcement:

“Investing in our public higher education system is a key part of a long-term solution to a productive and vibrant workforce . . . Today’s announcement underscores our administration’s commitment to help these institutions get the infrastructure they need to train a modern, skilled workforce.” [Education Secretary James A. Peyser]

“The Workforce Skills Cabinet is focused on ensuring that the public workforce system is serving the *needs of employers*, and that community colleges are equipping workers with the skills they

⁵ The University of Massachusetts system is the only remaining public land-grant university.

⁶ United States Census Bureau, Massachusetts facts: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/25>

⁷ This number excludes special-interest colleges such as theological seminaries and music schools, as well as professional schools such as law and medicine. The total count of all such institutions brings the number of colleges in Massachusetts to 114.

⁸ Dougherty, Kevin James. 1994. *The contradictory college the conflicting origins, impacts, and futures of the community college*. Albany: State University of New York Press. Pg. 119.

⁹ Dougherty 1994, Pg. 115

need to secure jobs.”¹⁰ [Chair of the Workforce Skills Cabinet and Secretary of Labor and Workforce Development Ronald L. Walker II]

Another recent (and obvious) example of the influence of government partnered with business in very directly shaping the CC’s educational offerings is the establishment of the “Massachusetts Casino Career Training Institute (MCCTI),” a casino jobs training consortium, located at Holyoke Community College, made specifically for training over 3,000 workers for the MGM Springfield Casino. According to MCCTI’s website:

The MCCTI was formed as a collaborating workforce development organization by the state’s fifteen community colleges. The MCCTI has developed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Massachusetts Gaming Commission to work collaboratively regarding workforce certification, training, licensure and other requirements. The Institute is collaborating with Workforce Investment Boards/Regional Employment Boards (WIB/REB), the Massachusetts community colleges, resort casino and slot facility developers and operators, educators, training providers, unions, and community based organizations to provide recruitment, screening, career counseling, training, and job placement strategies and solutions.¹¹

Bill Messner, President of Holyoke Community College, said of the MCCTI collaboration, “It’s terrific that all four casino operators are here and they’ve said they’re willing to work with us. Because that’s what it’s going to take, all of us working together. . . Some 3,000 jobs will need to be filled in each of the state’s three casinos, according to estimates. About 30 percent of those jobs will be in gaming operations, such as dealing, with the rest in other area such as culinary arts, hospitality, maintenance and security.”¹² President Ira Rubenzahl of Springfield Technical Community College, also part of the MCCTI consortium, said, “This is a unique opportunity because of the numbers of people involved...so we expect to be educating literally thousands of individuals.”¹³ Employers no longer want to invest money or time in training workers, so they expertly outsource this work to community colleges, who welcome the resulting higher enrollment and tuition fees for such training. In addition, students are increasingly being trained for specific positions within *one* corporation, and the skills learned may or may not transfer to other jobs.

The partnering of political and business interests in shaping the community college institution is not unique to this region, but happens nationally. Most recently, Gateway Technical College (GTC) in Wisconsin enthusiastically hopped onto Obama’s 2015 proposal of

¹⁰ Transcript. Charlie Baker visits HCC. Recorded August 25, 2015

¹¹ <http://www.mccti.org/mass.-casino-career-training-institute.html>. accessed Feb.13,2015

¹² <http://www.hcc.edu/news/casino-training> . accessed 2/13/15

¹³ <http://www.hcc.edu/news/casino-training> . accessed 2/ 13/15

making the first two years of community college free by announcing their “Gateway Promise” program, an initiative to fund tuition for newly graduated high school seniors from low-income families for two years. However, the funding for this program is being provided by the SC Johnson Corporation (maker of consumer durables such as Windex and Ziploc). A GTC official lauded the program, “We want to ensure all high school students have an opportunity to continue into college and be successful there . . . We’re also hoping to fulfill the need for employers for a skilled workforce.”¹⁴

This partnering of community colleges and private business has slowly emerged out of the massive economic liberalization of the 1970’s: community college researchers such as Penelope Herideen have been writing since the 1990’s on the reshaping of community colleges by private business interests and the myriad effects on students. She writes of one example:

North Carolina attracts businesses by providing free custom training of workers in the specific skills requested by the company...This provides businesses with a skilled workforce at the public’s expense. Firms can request a particular type of training for their workforce and the community college will co-create curricula to respond to business needs. . . These academic administrators see the principal mission of the community college to be a feeder institution for industry.”¹⁵

Because they are such malleable institutions, they are open to business interests during periods of national economic vulnerability. Every few decades, during times of significant economic transition, intense national political interest erupts around the community college in connection to labor force and job market needs. The political momentum generated at certain periods of history also led to the explosion of these institutions across the American higher education landscape. In 1947, President Truman established a commission to report on the state of the nation’s higher education landscape, titled *Higher Education for American Democracy*. The goals of the commission, when Truman announced it to the nation, was to “the insure that higher education shall take its proper place in our national effort to strengthen democracy at home and to improve our understanding of our friends and neighbors everywhere in the world.”¹⁶ It became known as the “Truman’s Commission Report,” and it called for a more unified and comprehensive national system of free public community colleges. From the 1950’s

¹⁴ <http://ccdaily.com/Pages/Campus-Issues/more-promise-programs.aspx>

¹⁵ Herideen, Penelope. 1998. *Policy, Pedagogy, and Social Inequality: Community college student realities in post-industrial America*, in *Critical Studies in Education and Culture Series*, edited by Henry Giroux. Bergin & Garvey: CT. pg. 111

¹⁶ Harry S. Truman, 1947, “Statement by the President Making Public a Report of the Commission on Higher Education” from *The American Presidency Project* <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=12802>>

onwards, individual states took up the commission's mandate and, as a response to increased labor demand and needs for a higher-skilled workforce after World War II, community colleges proliferated across the nation.

Some of the first U.S. community colleges, called "junior colleges," were established in 1901 and enrolled just under 2 percent of all college freshman (this is just under 10,000 students). By the 1990's, they had grown to a comprehensive nationwide public education system enrolling over 4.5 million students and totaling 40 percent of all America's private and public four-year colleges.¹⁷ Today (2016), they enroll a full half of all the nation's undergraduates and exist in higher numbers than four-year universities in most states (in 2013, 7.7 million people total across the nation attended community colleges: 3.1 million students enrolled full time, and 4.6 million students enrolled part-time).¹⁸ The community college has been called "the most successful institutional innovation in twentieth-century American higher education," and attempts to establish similar open-access higher education institutions are now being undertaken in other countries.¹⁹

In Massachusetts, the origins of the community college are largely rooted in the activism of progressive democratic senator Foster Furcolo, elected in 1956. He commissioned the *Audit Commission Report of 1958* to find out how to deal with the state's post-war population swell and the economy's increased need for skilled labor in industries such as medicine, agriculture, and engineering. He fought against a deeply entrenched religious conservative culture in the legislature, whom wanted to protect Massachusetts's system of elite private and religious (Protestant, Catholic and Jesuit) colleges to create a system of regional community colleges as "an effective and economical solution to the problems [of the state's unmet labor demand]."²⁰ The report argued that not only would community colleges, shown to be successful in other parts of the country, "train technical personnel," they would also "extend equality and opportunity" to the Massachusetts population at large due to the comprehensive nature of the community college. The report adopted the American Association of Junior College's mission to set up "comprehensive institutions combining liberal arts, vocational-technical, and adult education...to

¹⁷ Statistics from Brint & Karabel's *Diverted Dream* (1989), pg. 6

¹⁸ See: Columbia College's Community College Research Center: "Community College FAQ's." <<http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Community-College-FAQs.html>>

¹⁹ In Canada, Japan, and Yugoslavia. Brint & Karabel 1989, pg. 6

²⁰ Furcolo (1958, Massachusetts House of Representatives) quoted in Brint & Karabel 1989, pg. 145.

be provided at low cost to both the students and the taxpayers and to be located close to regional popular centers”²¹ (and ended up making this mission a legally-binding designation of a state community colleges when the report’s recommendations were approved in the *Act of 1958* legislation).

However in Massachusetts, as across the nation, it became apparent that community colleges had to wage a public image campaign for legitimacy as higher education institutions. Adding “liberal arts” to the AAJC mission was in part an attempt to do this: “Liberal arts gave respectability – the stamp of legitimacy. The standard for higher education in Massachusetts were the standards of private colleges . . . A six week training program for secretaries would not have been regarded as higher education. The transfer part had to be nailed down first.”²² At the same time as they were gaining this very legitimacy, it became clear they were threatening the larger class structure of higher education. Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel, who analyze the history of community colleges in *The Diverted Dream: Community Colleges and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900-1985* write of this relational dynamic between elite schools and community colleges:

When the junior college first appeared, the outlines of a hierarchical system of colleges and universities were already becoming visible. Nonetheless, the emergence of the junior college fundamentally altered the shape of American higher education, for it introduced a new tier into the existing hierarchy. Thus the two-year institution was not simply another of the many lower-status colleges that dotted America’s educational landscape; it was a different type of institution altogether. Unlike even the humblest four-year institution, it failed to offer what had come to be considered the sine qua non of being an “authentic” college – the bachelor’s degree.²³

Today there are fifteen community colleges in Massachusetts.

Again in the mid-1990’s, there was a resurgence of political interest in the community college, largely spearheaded by the Clinton administration. While Truman saw the community college as a way to “strengthen democracy” at home and abroad (job training and economic concerns were not outside this but were not the focus), Clinton saw in them a panacea for mid-90’s economic woes -- an opportunity to use the institution to compete in a newly emerging global information services economy, which demanded more technical training after high school. He was known to have visited and spoken at more community colleges during his presidency

²¹ Chap.605, Acts of 1958, quoted in Brint and Karabel, 1989: 145

²² Brint and Karabel, 1989: 148.

²³ Brint and Karabel, 1989: 6.

than all previous presidents combined.²⁴ Speaking in 1995 at the Conference of Mayors, Clinton said of the community college:

If everyone considering investing in your communities knew that every person who wanted a job could get the job training in a direct voucher from the federal government which could go to your community college to get the kind of training they need, that would help us to do what you need to do. We want to make you a full partner in designing a system of adult education and job placement. That will mean that community colleges, which are the new lifeblood for so many of your citizens, will be even stronger and, more importantly, will mean that you will be able to use this as *a tool to develop your own economies*. I believe this approach will play a major role in our goal, our common goal to restore the American Dream.²⁵ [emphasis mine]

Although the rhetorical and ideological focus was still on the ‘American dream’ and expanding opportunity and democracy, the motivation was economic. Other officials in the Clinton administration, such as the Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, stated that community colleges are “the investment banks of this human capital economy. . . [the] unsung heroes in the success of the United States in the global market.”²⁶ While the expansion of the community college throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s was under the guise and justification of being primarily a liberal-arts, transfer-focused institution; in the 90’s, the agenda took on an unapologetic vocational and worker training edge.

After the financial crisis of 2008, once again community colleges were looked to as a panacea for national economic woes. Coupled with this was a new national grassroots movement fighting against the runaway costs of four-year universities, and the resulting high levels of student debt (a crippling \$1.2 trillion), and which was working to rearticulate the goals, values and missions of higher education within the U.S. Inherent in this activism was a critique against current levels of economic and racial inequality in education at all levels, as well as a linking up to other forms of growing inequality in the United States, particularly that between the growing elite and shrinking middle class. Amidst this re-evaluation of values, community colleges were claiming a new, somewhat more esteemed, place within the overall higher education hierarchy – the questioning of their legitimacy was replaced with an appreciation for their flexibility, lower cost and specificity to local needs. This caught on at the federal level. While in 1995, Clinton announced a version of free tuition in terms of “tuition waivers” for students studying to work in specific high-demand service industries, President Obama took it a

²⁴ Moriarty, 1995: 6

²⁵ qtd. in Herideen 1990: 8

²⁶ Reich speaking in 1995, qtd in Herideen 1998: 8.

step further to announce a call for Congress to pass legislation making the first two years of community college completely tuition-free.²⁷ In his 2015 state of the Union, which largely focused on the ways in which the economy was recovering back to pre-2008 growth rates, he (like Clinton) invoked community colleges as the solution to helping Americans “stay ahead of the curve” in the global service economy, and explicitly asked for the investment of the private corporate sector:

...to make sure folks keep earning higher wages down the road, we have to do more to help Americans upgrade their skills. America thrived in the 20th century because we made high school free, sent a generation of GIs to college, trained the best workforce in the world. We were ahead of the curve. But other countries caught on. And in a 21st century economy that rewards knowledge like never before, we need to up our game. We need to do more. By the end of this decade, two in three job openings will require some higher education -- two in three. And yet, we still live in a country where too many bright, striving Americans are priced out of the education they need. It's not fair to them, and it's sure not smart for our future. That's why I'm sending this Congress a bold new plan to lower the cost of community college -- to zero. Keep in mind 40 percent of our college students choose community college. Some are young and starting out. Some are older and looking for a better job. Some are veterans and single parents trying to transition back into the job market. Whoever you are, this plan is your chance to graduate ready for the new economy without a load of debt. Understand, you've got to earn it. You've got to keep your grades up and graduate on time. . . . I want to spread that idea all across America, so that two years of college becomes as free and universal in America as high school is today. Let's stay ahead of the curve. . . .we're connecting community colleges with local employers to train workers to fill high-paying jobs like coding, and nursing, and robotics. Tonight, I'm also asking more businesses to follow the lead of companies like CVS and UPS, and offer more educational benefits and paid apprenticeships -- opportunities that give workers the chance to earn higher-paying jobs even if they don't have a higher education.²⁸

As I will discuss later in this paper, states have begun implementing varying and uneven versions of “free tuition for the first two years,” with many caveats for the reality of how students use community colleges.

Despite the fact that community colleges were shaped within these historical forces of state and national politics, as well as larger cultural politics, each institution in this study has a unique genesis and set of political-economic roots based on regional economics and local industrial structures (how labor forces are distributed across different industries), demographic data (such as racial and class composition, and immigration), and the social realities of the

²⁷ Although, as we shall see later in this paper, states so far have implemented this call in a deeply uneven and hesitant way. In Massachusetts, a bill was recently passed for a “tuition rebate for qualifying transfer-track students” that would in reality only help a very small percentage of the community college population.

²⁸ “Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address,” January 20, 2015. The White House Office of the Press Secretary < <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/20/remarks-president-state-union-address-january-20-2015>>.

decade they were established in. In *Metal Fatigue*, Robert Farrant describes the decline and eventual complete off-shoring of the Bosch firm in Springfield, which originally was an economically prospering city thanks to its metalworking industry, gutting the region and creating a reverberating pattern of unemployment and poverty for decade to come.²⁹ Springfield Technical Community College (STCC) was founded in this socioeconomic context, and originally created as the Springfield Technical Institute in 1964 by the City of Springfield, housed in the building of an old trade high school. Not turning into “STCC” until 1967, it was the 12th community college established in the state.³⁰ While STCC has since expanded its educational offerings to offer a comprehensive liberal arts transfer curriculum, it is still considered primarily a technical college (and has that reputation amongst students), offering training in high-demand fields such as biotechnology, IT security, laser electro-optics, nursing and other Allied Health fields, robotics, sonography, and telecommunications. The average age of attendance at STCC is 26, with a total age range of 17 to 79; 58% of the student population is female and 48% male; 47% attend full time and 58% attend part time.³¹ The total annual enrollment for 2015-2016 was 8,787 students (this includes day, evening, weekend, and online students). Racially, the student composition is 49% white, 27% Hispanic, 16% black, and 6% “other” or unidentified. 1,090 students received a degree or certificate in 2015.³² STCC promotional materials describes the college in the following way:

As the cost of higher education soars, public higher education has become the gateway to the American dream. As the only technical community college in Massachusetts, STCC is part of the Massachusetts public higher education system, which is comprised of 15 community colleges, nine state universities, and the five-campus University of Massachusetts System. Springfield Technical Community College (STCC) joins over 1,100 community colleges in the United States keeping that dream alive, not just for working class families, but for middle class families too. STCC leads the way among Massachusetts’ community colleges in championing statewide goals of access and success to benefit all students. Our faculty, staff and administration care passionately about preparing students for successful careers. It’s what we do best and it’s why STCC Works! Whether joining the workforce, or transferring to a four year college, students prove to themselves at STCC, that if you dream big and work hard, anything is possible.³³

²⁹ Farrant, Robert. 2009. *Metal Fatigue: American Bosch and the demise of metalworking in the Connecticut River Valley*. Baywood Publishing Company, New York. See chapter six, “Too Many Bends in the River: The Larger Valley’s Demise.”

³⁰ Historical facts about STCC: <https://www.stcc.edu/studentambassador/resources/HistoricalFactsAboutSTCC.pdf>

³¹ About STCC: <http://www.stcc.edu/aboutstcc/>

³² Statistics from “Executive Search Profile,” accessed at <https://www.stcc.edu/presidentialsearch/docs/STCCExecutiveSearchProfile.pdf>

³³ From: front page, <https://www.stcc.edu/presidentialsearch/docs/STCCExecutiveSearchProfile.pdf> → (see appendix 3)

Ten students in this sample are attending, or have attended, Springfield Technical [STCC].

The city of Holyoke, similar to Springfield, had a thriving local economy up until the 1950's. It was particularly resource-rich in converting water to electricity, which attracted investors as early as the 1840's. Railroads, linen and paper factories, and other industries sprung up around the dams and Irish, French-Canadian and Polish immigrants supplied much of the early labor.³⁴ These industries continued to be profitable up until the 1950's, when tobacco production in nearby Southwick and Westfield took over and demands for a new kind of labor shifted the demographics. Christopher Smith writes of this shift and how Holyoke became identified as a city of Puerto Rican immigrants:

Tobacco production was a crop that was in very high demand and the job of picking the leaves created a new wave of immigrants looking for their own "golden ticket" to the capital gains of America. Through a prime example of history repeating itself, Puerto Rico was targeted as a place to recruit workers for the tobacco industry. Puerto Rican workers presented themselves as a much more readily available labor pool due to the fact that they were already U.S. citizens thanks in large part to the Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917. The largest wave of Puerto Ricans arrived in the late 1960's and found that there was little, if any, housing available in either Westfield or Southwick. Yet in Holyoke, there was an infinite amount ready to be had, due to the closing of several of the paper mills. So, in came the mass exodus of "new immigrants" to the 'Golden Ireland Parish.'³⁵

It was during these shifts in both labor and immigration that Holyoke Community College was founded. It began in 1946, not as a formal community college, but as a municipal education program called "Holyoke Graduate School," whose purpose was to provide night classes to returning WWII veterans and other adults. One year later, legislation was passed in Massachusetts allowing municipal higher education programs to be called "junior colleges" – the name was then changed to Holyoke Junior College, although the function of providing night education to adults remained the same.³⁶ It was not until 1964 that the college became "Holyoke Community College" [HCC] and was incorporated into the state's newly developed community college system.

In the fall of 2015, HCC had an enrollment count of 6,285 students (a stark enrollment downfall from it's annual average of around 9,000 students), 47% of whom are full-time students

³⁴ Smith, Christopher. 2008. "The Immigrant Experience in Holyoke, Massachusetts" in *Our Plural History*, accessed at <<http://ourpluralhistory.stcc.edu/resources/student/Immigrant%20Experience%20in%20Holyoke.pdf>>

³⁵ Smith, 2008: Pg.3

³⁶ HCC history: <http://www.hcc.edu/library/about-the-library/archives/hcc-history>

and 53% part-time students. 60% of enrolled students are white, 24% Hispanic,³⁷ 6% black, and 2% Asian. The total “minority count” (that is the percentage based on total known race/ethnic percentages) is 37%. HCC is also one of the youngest skewing schools in the sample: 31% of students are under age 20, 36% are 20 to 24; 13% are 25 to 29; 15% are 30 to 44; and 6% are over 45 years of age.³⁸ The graduation and transfer-out rates of full-time, degree-seeking students are both 19%.³⁹ They offer two main transfer-oriented degrees: an Associate of Arts and an Associate of Science, with a range of training certificates (although less comprehensive than the vocational training options available at STCC). There are twelve students currently attending, or having attended, HCC in this sample.

Greenfield Community College [GCC], founded in 1963, has the smallest student population with an annual enrollment of around 3,000 students (Fall 2015 enrollment, as in HCC’s case, was down to 2,050 students). It encompasses Franklin and Hampshire counties (although students in Hampshire county are closest to and primarily attend HCC), but also serves some students from Southern Vermont and New Hampshire. The student population is 40% male and 60% female, with 64% enrolled part-time and 36% enrolled full-time. 58% are “traditional age” (24 and younger) while 42% are “non traditional” age (25 and higher). The school’s racial demographics are 81% white, 6% Hispanic, 3% black, and 3% Asian: students of color are under-represented here compared to community colleges nationally.⁴⁰ The largest employers surrounding Greenfield are Yankee Candle and Bay State Medical Center, and the three GCC students I interviewed were involved in some way with one of these employers. GCC is unique in its offering of a liberal arts degree with a health concentration, and also offers the widest range of nursing and allied health field degrees. In addition to the standard Associate of

³⁷ This is a source of contention among administrative staff and faculty: the fact that HCC does not serve a full 25% Hispanic students means that it is not a designated “Latino-serving institution” and so is not eligible to receive federal funding in this area. I have also had discussions with faculty, when I’ve asked them how the campus has changed in the time they’ve been there, who have said emphatically, “it has gotten whiter.” (Perhaps this shift is in response to the changes the administration is implementing in terms of trying to net a more affluent student population).

³⁸ HCC Credit Student Profile: Fall 2015 < <http://www.hcc.edu/about-hcc/facts-and-history/fast-facts/student-profile>>

³⁹ HCC Graduation and Transfer-Out Rates: <http://www.hcc.edu/about-hcc/facts-and-history/fast-facts/graduate-and-transfer-rates>

⁴⁰ GCC IPEDS Data Feedback Report, “Figure 1. Percent of all students enrolled, by race/ethnicity and percent of students who are women: Fall 2013”: http://www.gcc.mass.edu/about/files/2014/07/IPEDSDFR2014_165981.pdf

Arts and Associate of Science transfer degrees, there are a small range of vocational certificates offered. There are three students in this sample attending or having had attended GCC.

C. Summary of Layout of Thesis

The core argument of this thesis is that community colleges are understudied in the larger study of social reproduction in higher education, despite the overwhelming number of undergraduates they serve and the myriad functions they fulfill. When community colleges are taken up as objects of study, the research terms are generally too narrow for a big-picture accounting of the ways they affect students' trajectories, particularly in terms of the reproduction of inequality. This is a huge oversight, given that the community college is a unique national site where the lives of working class Americans and the culturally important ideology of social mobility through education, or the 'American dream,' is put to the test. Therefore, this study employs the perspectives of cultural studies scholars who have spent time at the intersections adult or vocational education (two roles the community college serves in the U.S. context) and cultural theory, and endorses the argument that social inequality is reproduced not just through institutional workings that are unidirectionally imposed on people, but through the active interpretation and creative activity on the part of people moving through a particular system. This is not to say that human agency has not been debated within social reproduction studies before, but that the cultural studies body of work in this area never lets this discussion become 'either determinism or agency' and insists on an accounting for both in whatever unpredictable forms they may appear. This perspective is also uniquely concerned with the subjective experience of reproduction on the people involved, and the analytical framework is sophisticated enough to allow for an accounting of experiences of "freedom" within oppressive systems (and vice-versa). This thesis attempts to examine Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour* analysis in the community college context: his ongoing applicability is evidenced by community college students as they talk about the potentials and pitfalls of their education.

To better understand the discussion around social reproduction and higher education, how it applies to the community college, and how a critical cultural studies analysis can enhance this discussion, Chapter Two presents an overview of the relevant literature organized in three different categories: 1) The community college as an economic, political and cultural site 2) Social reproduction in modern higher education: the role of meritocracy, and 3) Critical Cultural

Studies: Raymond Williams, Paul Willis & the political potentials of adult education. Chapter Three presents a detailed description of the qualitative methodology and research design selected for this study, and gives rationale and explanation for the materials selected for analysis. It also describes the three data sets that constitute the bulk of research for this study, and why these three sets were important to be included. Also included in Chapter Three is a discussion of the limitations of the methodology employed, particularly when it comes to using interviews and how to analyze the claims put forth by interviewees about their own experience.

In Chapter Four, the studies guiding research questions and findings are addressed – namely, how do community colleges facilitate reproduction and mobility through their institutional workings; what narrative is created around this; and how students experience their education at the community college. This chapter organizes findings from all data sources into three “contradictions” that emerged: the organization of the institution and student body around vocational (“workforce development”) versus academic (“liberal arts” or “transfer”) tracks; the students perceived “transformation” into intellectual, college-going subjects; and political activism and progressivism in the increasingly corporatized learning space of the community college classroom.

In the concluding chapter, a summary of the findings is presented in terms of their implications for students and community colleges, and is contextualized within a discussion of available literature on reproducing the labor force and the central dynamic that race plays in this process. Education researchers have found clear trends of community colleges serving a majority of the students of color who go to college, but these trends have never been coupled with a class-based analysis. In this chapter, I will also argue that processes of social mobility and reproduction of inequality are not unique to community colleges, or higher education in general, but that these generation-long processes are accelerated or interrupted in dramatic ways at these sites, offering ruptures within the consciousness of students themselves that can become open for analysis. I will discuss the larger limitations of this project as well as the ways it can be of broader theoretical relevance. Finally, the thesis will conclude with three potential future directions – themes of political urgency that emerged within my findings but were not able to be discussed in-depth here. First, the large number of undocumented students who attempt to go the community college route and the unique challenges they face, as well as the political atmosphere the community college provides for their activism. Second, the challenges of providing higher

education in rural America, which has the lowest rate of college-going in the nation, and the innovative ways community colleges are taking up that challenge. Finally, the political significance of the community college as one of the only educational sites willing to take up prisoner education, and the benefits of this to remedying a broken criminal justice system.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

As discussed in the introduction, the study of social reproduction (the reproduction of class- and race-based privilege and inequality) through higher education is not new. Four-year universities are recognized as important points for either interrupting or accelerating what is normally a generations-long process. What is new is the context within which it is studied, that is a widening of class and racial inequality in the country, which has been compared to both “pre-depression era inequality” and Jim-Crow levels of income stagnation, unemployment, and racial segregation.⁴¹ This national political reality has slowly eroded the certainty for mobility that a college degree used to represent by increasingly privatizing universities, with detrimental effects for the most vulnerable students – that is working-class students of color.⁴² Since the 1980’s, four-year schools have become dominated by affluent students: parental income is now the strongest predictor of admission.⁴³ Not only are lower numbers of “first generation,” African American and Latino/a students making it into four-year universities, but those that do graduate are doing so with prohibitive levels of debt, effectively canceling out any economic benefit of their degree.⁴⁴ At the same time, college degrees are becoming as necessary as high school degrees for securing sustaining jobs. This section will consider social reproduction literature in this contemporary context.

This section starts with considering the social role of the community college in cultural studies terms; the next section will broaden out to what the academic understanding of social reproduction is in general higher education scholarship and how this can be applied to the community college. Lastly, I will discuss the relevant theoretical contributions from cultural studies and describe the analytical framework that will be employed.

⁴¹ See writings of Michelle Alexander, “New Jim Crow” and <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/growing-apart-a-political-history-of-american-inequality/index> (“Growing Apart: A Political History of American Inequality,” by Colin Gordon).

⁴² See Clawson & Leiblum, 2008.

⁴³ See Rivera 2015: pg. 273

⁴⁴ Clawson & Leiblum, 2008, Putnam 2015

A. The community college as an economic, political and cultural site

The body of literature existing on community colleges cuts across multiple fields: education policy, sociology, economics, as well as corporate research think-tanks. I will offer a brief review of the similar economic themes that arise across fields, focusing on the dominant research framings that hangs most community college research together. I will also briefly review the work histories of two cultural studies thinkers in particular, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, in their respective capacity as educators in open universities and adult education in Britain – systems that are remarkably similar to the modern American community colleges. They each, in turn, wrote of these personal experiences as affecting their larger theoretical projects in cultural studies. Their inclusion adds a political and cultural dimension to thinking about the social role of community colleges.

As discussed in the introduction, President Truman’s 1947 commissioned report, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, was a critical turning point for America’s higher education system, and community colleges in particular. It asserted that the university system needed to fundamentally change to become more accessible, and that what was needed was locally-based, small colleges that focused solely on the first two years of university education; as well as training programs to produce workers suited to regional economies. The establishment of ‘community,’ or open-access, colleges proliferated across the nation. Their missions were broad, flexible, and rooted in their locale: most of them had in common, at the very minimum, dual purposes to provide university preparation as well as worker training tracks where necessary. This is also when the first wave of adult students began entering college: veterans entered in massive numbers after the 1944 passage of the GI Bill. Philo Hutcheson, writing about the historical significance of this report on the higher education landscape writes:

The veterans’ impact was not simply numerical but also perceptual as they altered faculty and administrators’ expectations about who could succeed in college. Grizzled, battle-hardened soldiers were clearly different from fresh-faced college boys and girls, and the veterans showed not only that they could compete, but often that they could outperform traditional college students. While recent empirical investigations have shown that many of those veterans were in college or were college-bound when World War II began, nevertheless, the myth of who were appropriate college students began to shift.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Hutcheson, Philo A. “The Truman Commission’s Vision of the Future,” in *The NEA Higher Education Journal*, Fall 2007: Pg. 110

The historical result of the 1947 commission was the creation of a system of state-based and locally-governed national community colleges. However, the 1970's challenged the commission's original vision and commitment to democracy in education. The national economy was at the beginning of a significant and rocky transition. President Richard Nixon dissolved the Breton-Woods agreement (so that the dollar was no longer valued against gold), global oil shocks, and the advent of the IMF's structural adjustment programs were the beginnings of what we know of today as globalization. Structural adjustment meant the erosion and off-shoring of national manufacturing, and waves of jobless workers were now enrolling in the community college for worker retraining; this spike in enrollment meant many institutions shifted away from liberal-arts, and focused energy on growing their vocational education and job training programs to catch these potential students. Coupled with this was a national feminist movement that asserted women's right to go into the workforce in greater numbers: women were also enrolling in community colleges in large numbers, and pursuing new avenues of employment and educational opportunities. In 1972, the Pell Grant was established, a federal financial aid program to help low-income students go to college and eventually get a bachelor's degree,⁴⁶ which also contributed to the swelling of community college enrollment and deepened the relationships between political and business interests. The 1970's was the decade that experienced the greatest increase in community college enrollment (adjusted for population growth) and also the re-branding of the institution from 'junior college' (as in, institutions meant primarily for university preparation) to 'community colleges' (serving a variety of needs within a community, such as worker retraining, self development courses, and university preparation).⁴⁷

In the 1990's, community colleges were again re-invoked as "the lifeblood" of workers and the national economy (see discussion in introduction). The economic developments of the 1970's had swung full-circle into a now almost completely service-based economy, with most women working outside of the home as necessity and not necessarily as political empowerment.

⁴⁶ This is an important caveat to the Pell program: since it was created to encourage bachelor degree completion, it only funds "liberal arts transfer" at community colleges, and many low-income students that wish to go to the community college for worker training/vocational tracks (such as nursing, mechanics or inspector training, etc) are not eligible for this funding. See: <http://hechingerreport.org/outdated-pell-rules-may-discriminate-against-low-income-students/>

⁴⁷ "The Changing Landscape of Higher Education: 1965-2005," Journal Issue: Transition to Adulthood Vol 20, Number 1, Spring 2010

The current reality that makes community colleges politically relevant again has to do not only with a changing economy, but also with the unprecedented corporatization of public education across all fronts and the drawback of much of the college “accessibility” that was won throughout the 60’s and 70’s (not just through civil rights movements, but by increased federal funding and political will). Public education from kindergarten to four-year universities are experiencing a national re-segregation of students of color into lower-income and lower-performing schools (not to mention the establishment of the “school-to-prison” pipeline for African American students in particular).⁴⁸ Working class and students of color are also being systematically “priced out” of four-year universities through severe cuts to financial aid, with loans now representing two-thirds of all financial aid given – it is now considered too expensive for universities to accept working class students at the expense of attracting affluent whites (who now receive three times as much financial aid as low-income students).⁴⁹

Community colleges are increasingly becoming the only available option financially to students who, in the past, would have easily been accepted and paid into a four-year university system – increasingly so now that college-level education is as necessary as a high school diploma to secure entry-level jobs. The number of African American enrolled at community colleges represents almost 16% of all community college students (reaching about 1.2 million students), a shift up from 11% in the early 90’s,⁵⁰ perhaps indicating a structural shift of African American students away from four-years. Community colleges are seen as an answer not just by lower-income students looking for vocational training or university preparation, but also increasingly by middle-class families looking to save on record-high tuition costs at four-year schools. Many states have enacted “dual-enrollment” policies which fund two years of community college for high school juniors who maintain a certain GPA (these are programs that are application-only and tend to be restricted to higher-performing high school students). This has caused community colleges to want to rebrand their image⁵¹ to catch these high-performing students.

⁴⁸ ACLU, “What is the School to Prison Pipeline?” < <https://www.aclu.org/fact-sheet/what-school-prison-pipeline>>

⁴⁹ See discussion by Clawson & Leiblum, 2008: they have shown students in the top 10% of the income bracket receive more financial aid in merit grants and scholarships, while students in the lowest income bracket receive mostly loan packages.

⁵⁰ American Association of Community Colleges “Data Points”, http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Publications/datapoints/Documents/DP_Feb18R1.pdf

⁵¹ For example, Pres. Bill Messner of HCC infamously stating, “Holyoke community college may be in, but is not *of*, Holyoke,” to the great offense of the local community.

Given this main dynamic of the community college – an institution that serves a majority of lower-income students, students of color, adult students and workers, and those otherwise ‘priced out’ of more traditional university – what does academic research say about its importance for social mobility among its students? The debates fall on two main lines of the 1) harmful or 2) beneficial effects of attending the institution. The first group, those researchers that consider the community college harmful to lower-income students, maintain that four-year universities purposely use community colleges to segregate out the “less attractive” students (that is, low-income students who require financial aid funding, or lower performing students who struggled in high school and whose test scores would bring down the university’s overall rating).⁵² This dynamic of four-year universities attempting to use surrounding community colleges as bulwarks for students they don’t want or won’t find profitable can be seen in the relationship to University of Massachusetts Amherst and surrounding community colleges. While HCC, STCC, and GCC all statistically serve near-representative levels of lower-income and students of color to the area they are in,⁵³ UMass currently is rated as an “F” institution for diversity:

Engines of Inequality, a recent report from the Education Trust, examines the failure of flagship campuses to serve underrepresented minority students. The report gives UMass Amherst an “F” for underrepresented minority access, noting that in the Fall of 2004, underrepresented minorities made up only 8.1% of the incoming freshman class, although such students constitute 15.3% of the spring 2004 Massachusetts’ graduating high school class...*recruiting and retaining underrepresented students should be the goal of community and state colleges, while the flagship campus strives for so-called objective merit.*⁵⁴ [emphasis mine]

Community college students in my sample tend to be hyper-aware of this dynamic, and either tend to perceive themselves as “unwanted”⁵⁵ by the four-year system or as somehow incapable of blending with their perception of “higher-leveled students” at the four-year university.⁵⁶

⁵² Dougherty, Kevin. 1994. “The Debate Deepened,” in *The Contradictory College*. SUNY Press: Albany. Pgs. 18-20.

⁵³ Surprisingly, HCC is the only institution that does not fit the representativeness of Holyoke. They are not federally-designated as a “Latino-serving institution,” which would require they serve at least 25% Hispanic/Latino students (although they are only one percentage point under, as their total Latino population is at 24%). This may be due to the fact that higher numbers of students of color from Holyoke go to STCC and HCC is aggressively pursuing ‘higher performing’ middle-class students from white backgrounds.

⁵⁴ Clawson & Leiblum 2008, pg. 22

⁵⁵ interview transcript -#17E, pg.16

⁵⁶ interview transcript, #2B, pg.3

This group of researchers that sees community colleges as harmful to students themselves and effectively segregating the higher education landscape into a prestigious four-year and lower-tiered two-year option, tend to use achieving a bachelors degree as their marker: graduation of community college students from four-year universities sits at the 14% mark, with 80% saying that they wish to receive a bachelor's degree on incoming surveys.⁵⁷ Researchers have also identified what is called the “transfer attrition phenomenon” where the 14% of students who do finally transfer into four-year schools experience high attrition (or drop out) rates due to 1) inadequate academic preparation on the part of the community college, 2) lack of financial aid to community college students, who often have families to support and jobs to hold down and cannot physically attend the four-year without adequate aid and, 3) inability to navigate the larger and often incomprehensible system of the four-year due to lack of transfer-specific support.⁵⁸ Researchers who argue for the beneficial effects of community college tend to use broader markers of success – not only looking at four-year transfer, but also at job placement, wages and earnings longitudinally, and rates of degree completion within the community college itself (versus where the degree leads to). They also argue for the beneficial effects on the community, in terms of higher levels of employment in areas where community colleges are located and more successful businesses.

On both sides of this debate, there is a focus on research framing that favors the quantitative effects and economic outcomes, and although this is vitally important to understanding whether the community college actually reproduces inequality or offers new avenues of opportunity and access, the debate tends to stay locked in an ‘either/or’ approach to social reproduction. There are other dimensions to consider: the experience on the part of the people involved, what meaning is made out of the experience, and how success is measured by

⁵⁷ This is based on a 2016 report from the CCRC at Columbia University. They found that only 14% of all students who entered a community college in 2007 transferred and then earned a four-year degree within six years. Among those who did transfer, on average 42 percent went on to get a bachelor's degree within six years of starting at a community college. These results varied by state – from just 13% in South Dakota to 49% in Washington and Iowa. Report citation: Jenkins, Davis, and Fink, John. January 2016. “[Tracking Transfer](#): New Measures of Institutional and State Effectiveness in Helping Community College Students Attain Bachelor's Degrees,” from Community College Research Center. The previous statistic from AACC has been reported at 12%.

⁵⁸ See Jenkins & Fink, “[What We Know About Transfer](#),” from the Community College Research Center at Columbia College, January 2015.

students themselves. It is a mistake to set a static measure of success to as diverse a population as in community colleges, due to the simple fact that every student has had a radically different starting point. It is also important to consider the larger social role of the community college, and how it may facilitate complex, and contradictory, experiences and outcomes in its student population.

Alternative measures of success that this study suggests add a qualitative dimension and include subjective, political, and relational dimensions. The British critical cultural studies tradition can be argued to be rooted in a version of adult education and ‘public pedagogy’ that can be compared to the role of the American community college. Looking to the work of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall as adult lecturers and teachers in open university systems justifies the usage of these dimensions. Josh Cole, writing of Raymond Williams biography as an educator in the *Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, says:

As an adult educator, Raymond Williams began to reconcile the schism between the community-based informal education he received in Pandy, and the ‘official,’ elite education bestowed upon him through English schooling and higher education. He did so by attempting to use Oxford’s adult education programme to actualize a process of lifelong learning conducive to a radical expansion of community and democracy. Williams insisted that ‘education was ordinary,’ and was a means through which people of all ages could both immerse themselves in a common culture, and refine and sharpen that culture against their own individual experiences. . . . Adult education offered a unique means of deconstructing the social hierarchies created by other forms of education, rather than reinforcing those hierarchies in the name of private or commercial interests. In adult education, people could cultivate critical skills by interacting with others whom they might not normally encounter (a factory labourer and a physician could engage in philosophical discourse, for instance) and thus create a concrete, working model for a future democratic society (Williams 1993: 221; 219). Education as a mere means of post-war material advancement—a means of creating a “newly mobile and varied elite”—was anathema to Williams’ conception of lifelong learning (Williams 1993: 223).⁵⁹

Similarly, Stuart Hall spent 18 years, from 1979 to 1997, of his professional life teaching sociology at the Open University – a similar institution to the community college in its open-access admissions policy, ‘nontraditional’ student population, and it’s early use of telecourse and internet courses. Although Hall never wrote explicitly of his time at the Open University and its direct effect on his theoretical projects within cultural studies, he published some of his most paradigmatic works while teaching there, including *Encoding/Decoding* (1980), *The Hard Road*

⁵⁹ Cole, Josh (2008). ‘Raymond Williams and education – a slow reach again for control’, *the encyclopedia of informal education*. <<http://infed.org/mobi/raymond-williams-and-education-a-slow-reach-again-for-control/>>

to *Renewal* (1988), and *Marxism Without Guarantees* (1986). In a 2007 interview, Hall recounts how he saw his work teaching at the Open University:

. . . I could teach [sociology]. But I didn't want to do that in an established university. I didn't want teach it in Essex or in Warwick. I wanted to take these ideas, which had been worked out with a highly selected group of students...to a wider terrain. I wanted the pressure on me of making more popular the ideas that I'd been working on in cultural studies. So the Open University, which I did some work with in any case while I was still at the Centre, seemed ideal. And it just happened that it came up; it came up a bit earlier than I was planning to leave, and I thought, this is about the only place you'd be happy going to in academia. And so I took it then, and so I left the Centre.⁶⁰

Cultural studies scholar Ien Ang draws out this tension that Hall felt between academic and intellectual work, and noted that Hall's work at the Open University was about continuing his role as a public intellectual, and engaging in a 'public pedagogy' that could more usefully extend the political life of cultural studies than in the traditional university:

To be sure, although the Open University was of course an academic environment, what was important for Hall about his appointment there was not the academic consolidation of cultural studies as a field, but the opportunity it provided him to engage in public pedagogy: 'My instincts were towards widening access to adult education. Birmingham was an intellectual elite, whereas the average age at the [Open University] was 40... It was an intellectual challenge.'⁶¹

American community colleges are, by necessity, engaged in a similar form of public pedagogy. The ethos of "education is ordinary" is encapsulated in their general open admissions policy, and their social role in the U.S. context strikes similarly to the teaching contexts in which Williams and Hall did some of their most influential work. The intellectual challenge of teaching classrooms with wide age ranges, race and ethnicity, and background educational levels; and the "deconstruction of social hierarchies . . . by interacting with others whom [students] might not normally encounter," contains the same potential seeds for democratic society that Williams and Hall saw in adult education in their own contexts. Casting the social role of the community college in this larger view is what motivates this study, and also factors into the methodological design and findings; in addition, this specific critical cultural studies analytical framework used here (focusing on relevant contributions from Williams, Hall, and Willis) gives this social role a concrete, yet unique, language and important point of comparison.

⁶⁰ MacCabe, Colin. "An Interview With Stuart Hall, December 2007." *Critical Quarterly*, 50, no. 1-2 (2008 Spring-Summer): p. 31

⁶¹ Ang, Ien. 2016. "Stuart Hall and the tension between academic and intellectual work," in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*: Vol.19(1): Pg. 38.

B. Social reproduction in modern higher education: the role of meritocracy

“...the school is a battlefield, and its role in the social and technical division of labor is reproduced through contradiction and conflict.”

-Stanley Aronowitz, 1981 forward to *Learning to Labor*

The literature on social reproduction in modern higher education revolves around the analysis of two levels: the economic (or what Hall would call ‘vulgar economism’), as embodied in material production and labor reproduction processes; and the cultural, not a separate sphere, but tied to the society’s economic processes. In both cultural studies and sociology, theorists approach these two levels in separate ways to understand how higher education prepares the subjectivity and social positioning of laborers, and then structures the larger class system of the society. Though these analytical levels stay separated in our language and understanding, they are in reality inseparable in all aspects of the phenomenon being studied. Raymond Williams (speaking of the original Marxist base-superstructure metaphor), “the problem is not that it is too materialist, but that it is not materialist enough; it fails to see that culture is itself material.”⁶²

Higher education is a vital institution to the social reproduction of labor power, not only to those students it educates and confers credentials to, but also to the individuals left out of the education and credentialing process (and this effect on the class structure of the society as a whole). Social reproduction as a theoretical idea is rooted in Marx’s political economy, around the “peculiar property of [labor power] being a source of value,” and the way this labor power is produced and reproduced, to generate capital. From *The German Ideology*:

The production of life, both of one’s own by labor and of fresh life by procreation, appears at once as a double relationship, on the one hand as a natural and on the other as a social relationship. By social is meant the cooperation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner or to what end. It follows from this, that a determinate mode of production, or industrial stage, is always bound up with a determinate mode of cooperation or social stage, and this mode of cooperation is itself a ‘productive force.’ It also follows that the mass of productive forces accessible to men determines the condition of society, and that the ‘history of humanity’ must therefore always be studied and treated in relation to the history of industry and exchange.⁶³

⁶² quoted in Morgan, W.J., “Antonio Gramsci and Raymond Williams: Workers, Intellectuals, and Adult Education,” in *Gramsci and Education* (2002), edited by Borg et al.,pg. 244

⁶³ quoted in Hall, “Rethinking The Base and Superstructure Metaphor,” 1977: pg. 45

Stuart Hall interprets this passage, specifically in regards to the importance of this ‘double relationship:

Mode of production is already conceptualized as consisting, neither of economic relations per se, nor of anything so vulgarly material as ‘level of technology’: but as a combination of relations – productive forces, social relations of production. These, in each epoch, form the determining matrix, in which social life and material existence is produced and reproduced. And the [political, legal, civil, and consciousness] structures raised on this foundation, which embody and articulate the social relations stemming from the productive matrix, correspond to it. Indeed, in the ‘double relationship,’ both – material and social reproduction – are simultaneously founded.⁶⁴

The society reproduces itself according to the limitations of the mode of production, and schools are trapped within this boundary, which can be viewed more as an “...open horizon – determinacy without guaranteed closures,”⁶⁵ rather than a wholly determinative force. To zoom in and analyze one institutions or cultural form within this (and as we will see, these cannot be separated out so easy), must be coupled with an analysis of the mode of production, or in respect to this ‘double relationship’ that Marx articulated. Social reproduction in this sense attempts to match the needs of the ‘market’ (a misleading and incomplete term), and schools being within this double relationship also attempt to match or teach to the supposed ‘market’.

Labor power is not only prepared and re-prepared through and for economic base-level forces, it is also ‘self-prepared’ culturally and subjectively. Here, it is useful to address what the Birmingham tradition has laid bare as a far more difficult relationship between agency and determination; action and structure. ‘Creativity’ is the critical notion that takes us out of a mechanistic view of reproduction, and into the far more uncertain world of human action – but this is not free action with limitless possibility; this is action strapped to the cultural options available and with the outcomes to be “discovered, not imagined...the result of concrete and uncertain exploration.”⁶⁶ Willis writes:

The recognition of determination does not, however, dismiss creativity. . . [the] cultural form is not produced by simple outside determination. It is produced also from the activities and struggles of each new generation. We are dealing with collective, if not consciously directed, will and action as they overlay, and themselves take up ‘creative’ positions with respect to finally reproduce what we call ‘outside determinations.’ It is these cultural and subjective processes, and actions which flow from them, which actually produce and reproduce what we think of as aspects of structure.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Hall, "Rethinking the Base and Superstructure Metaphor." *Papers on Class, Hegemony and Party*. Bloomfield, J., ed. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1977: pg. 51

⁶⁵ Hall, Stuart. 1983. "The Problem of ideology: Marxism without guarantees," reprinted in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in cultural studies*, (Edited by Morley and Chen), 1996: Routledge. Pg. 45

⁶⁶ Willis 1977, 121

⁶⁷ Willis 1977, 120-121

Paul Willis further showed in *Learning to Labor* that cultural production and material production are not separate, incomparable processes:

Cultural reproduction in particular, always carries with it the possibility of producing – indeed in a certain sense it really lives out – alternative outcomes. . . . Indeed in such areas as the generation of a distinctive style in clothing or changes made in the physical environment the production *is* material production. The basis for, and impetus of, this production is the informal social group and its collective energies at its own proper level.⁶⁸

Pierre Bourdieu, writing from within sociology, made similar observations to Willis about the dialectical between the cultural and material, in the form of his widely-employed concept of “habitus” – the conditioning of economic relations (relations of domination) within the subjectivity, identity, practices and general cultural production of the individual within a given society (this also includes the possession of different levels of “capital” such as ‘cultural capital’). The habitus lives within the individual as internalized social structures that guides an individual’s actions, connects the individual back to society, and essentially concretizes the relations of domination within him or her and then works to reinforce and reproduce these larger relations. However, the over-focus and isolation of Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ within sociology of education research has left out the more encompassing, and frankly more damning, of his systemic analyses and theoretical contributions. He centered much of his research on the total social system of class domination within schools because of the school system’s “unequaled effect” on social reproduction:

The existence of such a powerful and exclusive relationship between the level of education and cultural practice should not conceal the fact that, in view of the implicit presuppositions that govern it, the action of the educational system can attain full effectiveness only to the extent that it bears upon individuals who have previously granted a certain familiarity with the world of [high culture] by their family upbringing. Indeed, it would seem that *the action of the school, whose effect is unequal* (if only from the point of duration) among children from different social classes, and whose success varies considerably among those upon whom it has an effect, *tends to reinforce and to consecrate by its sanctions the initial inequalities*. . . . The education system reproduces all the more perfectly the structure of the distribution of cultural capital among classes . . . in that the culture which it transmits is closer to the dominant culture...⁶⁹ [emphasis mine]

Bourdieu was basing his theory in the context of the 1960’s-70’s French educational system: his claim that the education system is in fact more of a closed feedback loop (in which

⁶⁸ Willis 1977, 172-173

⁶⁹ Bourdieu, Pierre. 1973. “Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction,” in *Knowledge, Education and Social Change: Papers in the Sociology of Education*, edited by R. Brown. Tavistock Publications, UK: Pg. 71-112 (also used Pg. 71, 73, 78, 80–81, 84, 85–86)

only individuals that are “previously granted a certain familiarity with the world of high culture” can benefit from the system at all) seems outdated and based on a society with a particularly rigid and impermeable class structure, perhaps not directly relevant to the American context with our ideal of meritocracy and powerful belief in the equalizing effect of education (the fact of the mere existence of the American community college is often used to illustrate this, as exemplified in the nickname “democracy’s college” widely used by community college defenders and critics alike). However, the meritocratic ideology existed just as strongly in the French educational context at that time, and was an explicit part of Bourdieu’s larger analysis:

. . . By making social hierarchies and the reproduction of these hierarchies *appear* based upon the hierarchy of ‘gifts’, merits, or skill established and ratified by its sanctions, or, in a word, by *converting social hierarchies into academic hierarchies*, the educational system fulfills a function of legitimation which is more and more necessary to the perpetuation of the ‘social order’ as the evolution of the power relationship between classes tends more completely to exclude the imposition of a hierarchy based upon the crude and ruthless affirmation of the power relationship. . . The objective mechanisms which enable the ruling class to keep the monopoly of the most prestigious educational establishments, while continually *appearing* at least to put the chance of possessing that monopoly into the hands of every generation, are concealed beneath the cloak of a *perfectly democratic method of selection which takes into account only merit and talent*, and these the members of the dominated classes whom they eliminate in the same way as they convert those whom they elect, and which ensures that those who are ‘miraculously elected’ may experience as miraculous an exceptional destiny which is the best testimony of academic democracy.⁷⁰ [emphasis mine]

Here he is pointing to the increased importance of the ideological function to securing this relationship of domination (with ‘meritocracy’ being a key idea to naturalizing this relationship), precisely at a time when the rigid class structure appeared to be unraveling. Meritocracy thus becomes a sort of naturalized ‘common sense,’ within the education system and larger society as a whole, and a lynchpin to the larger process of hegemony in this realm.

Compared with European schools, however, which were relatively regimented and socially closed (in terms of elites being separated from workers),⁷¹ the American education system has often been viewed as more open and even egalitarian:

...Compared with the educational systems of other advanced industrial countries, American education has been characterized by striking levels of openness and fluidity. . . One of the most distinctive features – and one that is fundamental to its openness – is that it gives students with undistinguished academic records multiple chances to succeed. Whereas in England and many

⁷⁰ Bourdieu, Pierre. 1973. “Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction,” in *Knowledge, Education and Social Change: Papers in the Sociology of Education*, edited by R. Brown. Tavisock, UK: Tavistock Publications: Pg. 71-112 (also used pg’s 71, 73, 78, 80–81, 84, 85–86)

⁷¹ See Brint & Karabel (1989) for a comparison in elitism versus openness in European and American schools, pg: 220-221

other European countries, allocation to a nonacademic track took place as early as age eleven and henceforth had a virtually irreversible character, the “late bloomer” in the United States could reveal his or her talents in high school or even later.⁷²

Meritocracy as a structuring and class-securing ideology in the American educational context thus works in a paradoxical, and less straightforward, way than in the European context. It is the seeming open character of the American educational system that places the total responsibility for both failure and success on the individual, and insists that neither class, race, gender, nor any other social position can stop a determined individual. The community college is *the* institutional embodiment of an ideology of meritocracy within the higher education system, and is invoked by stakeholders as evidence of an open, democratic, and egalitarian education system – one available for anyone “willing to work for it,” (as Obama stated in his State of the Union address). This ideology is so widespread and pervasive within the community college setting itself, that almost all promotional materials, mission statements, class catalogues and alumni communications (and even pictures in buildings and classrooms) are infused with this idea. Brint & Karabel write of the counter-intuitive nature of the meritocratic idea, and its ultimate outcome, which is a diminishment of national class consciousness:

The American educational system has thus been a powerful instrument for the dissemination of meritocratic ideas. For if the system offers opportunities for success to all who show talent and industry, then failure must reflect a deficiency of individual ability and/or effort. Part and parcel of these meritocratic ideas is an emphasis on individual mobility rather than group solidarity. Class consciousness, of course, has never been especially pronounced in the United States when compared with Europe. Many factors militated against the development of a sense of common fate among the American working classes, including the exceptional salience of racial and ethnic cleavages, the early extension of the franchise to all adult white males, and widespread geographic mobility. Yet among those features of American life hindering the growth of class sentiment must be counted its education system – with its rejection of early selection, its openness, its lack of segmentation, its sheer size, and its commitment to the provision of multiple chances to succeed – almost certainly reinforced the national emphasis on individual rather than collective advancement.⁷³

Of course, ideas do not exist on their own without some reality to back them up or justify their continued usage. There are innovative, open, egalitarian and democratic aspects of the American community college system, and this thesis will demonstrate that is the case for particular students. The community colleges does offer innovative things features (over any other educational system, within the U.S. or other countries) such as providing both vocational

⁷² Brint & Karabel 1989, pg. 221

⁷³ Brint & Karabel 1989, Pg. 223-224

and academic programs, offering two years instead of four years of education, and being open to the entire population (including adults) in terms of its open-access admission policy. However, the issue is to what extent the openness the community college offers to class structure within education is overstated and, more importantly, how it works to secure even further current power relationships and hegemony. Brint and Karabel go on to write of this as a “legitimation process”:

In addition to its role in transmitting inequalities, the American educational system may well contribute to the legitimation of those inequalities. The very structure of American schooling has the effect of obscuring the substantial level of transmission of privilege that actually does occur. And it probably does so more effectively than segmented systems on the European model, for the workings of these systems are socially transparent. It is difficult, for example, to miss the social-class implications of the traditional division of British secondary education into secondary modern technical, grammar, and “public” schools; the class implications of such a system are relatively obvious. In comparison, the American educational system conveys a strikingly democratic appearance, and its contribution to the transmission of inequality from generation to generation is, accordingly, rather opaque. As a general proposition, it seems likely that the more opaque the mode of transmitting inequalities, the more effective it is likely to be in legitimating these inequalities.⁷⁴

This is perhaps why, in Europe, you see violent street labor protests, worker strikes and student strikes in the news with almost weekly regularity (whereas in the U.S., it becomes an exceptional event).

The critical cultural studies body of work, beginning with Gramsci and through to Stuart Hall and, more recently, Henry Giroux, writes extensively on this process of hegemony within the society as a whole, and within the education system specifically. But, just as there is ‘vulgar economism,’ Hall writes there can also be a “vulgar conception of ideology as arising from a fixed and unalterable relation between the economic relation and how it is ‘expressed’ or represented in ideas. . . There is no fixed and unalterable relation between what the market is and how it is construed within an ideological or explanatory framework.”⁷⁵ Bourdieu’s usage of the ideological function of meritocracy as “appearance” or an illusion which conceals the “objective mechanisms” in class domination is consistent with this cultural studies conception of ideology

⁷⁴ Brint & Karabel 1989, Pg. 224

⁷⁵ Hall, Stuart. 1983. “The Problem of ideology: Marxism without guarantees,” reprinted in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in cultural studies*, (Edited by Morley and Chen), 1996: Routledge. Pg. 35-36.

which functions as “an explanation which is only partially adequate – and [only] in that sense, ‘false.’”⁷⁶ Hall goes on to write:

...the categories of market exchange obscure and mystify our understanding of the capitalist process: that is they do not enable us to see or formulate other aspects invisible. Is the worker who lives his or her relation to the circuits of capitalist production exclusively through the categories of a ‘fair price’ and a ‘fair wage’, in false consciousness? Yes, if by that we mean there is something about her situation which she cannot grasp with the categories she is using; *something about the process as a whole which is systematically hidden because the available concepts only give her a grasp of one of its many-sided moments*. No, if by that we mean that she is utterly deluded about what goes on under capitalism.⁷⁷ [emphasis mine]

Hegemony is therefore a key process to understanding social reproduction in any realm, education included. The ‘common sense’ of meritocracy so key to the American educational culture – if not understood through this lens of incompleteness and “hiddenness” as Hall describes above – can lead the analysis, and even the starting questions (as in the case of community college research) in the wrong direction. This only leads farther from understanding the amount of work that this cultural ideology does in legitimating relations of domination, and how it contributes to the overall reproduction of inequality.

In her book *Pedigree*, sociologist Lauren Rivera employs Bourdieu’s concepts to illustrate empirically how the meritocratic ideology works in our current context, what she terms the “aristocracy of merit.” She uses ethnography and an extensive network of interviews to understand the world of high-powered elite firms as they hire new graduates. Rivera takes the question of social reproduction in higher education one step farther, to looking at what happens *beyond* graduation and whether, despite equal skills and qualifications, those from privileged backgrounds end up being hired more often than those from less-privileged backgrounds, despite equal qualifications (in short, they do). It is not resumes, concrete skills or knowledge gained at university, or even the fact of being at an elite university that tilts hiring in favor of the more privileged at hiring firms; rather, she carefully demonstrates that it is *cultural signals* (operationalized as forms of “social and cultural capital”) that employers respond to, which they understand as a subjective sense of cultural “fit”:

Elite professional service firms – employers that serve as gatekeepers to high salaries and good jobs – play a critical role in this reproduction of privilege. In theory, the hiring practices of these

⁷⁶ Hall, Stuart. 1983. “The Problem of ideology: Marxism without guarantees,” reprinted in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in cultural studies*, (Edited by Morley and Chen), 1996: Routledge. Pg. 37

⁷⁷ Hall, Stuart. 1983. “The Problem of ideology: Marxism without guarantees,” reprinted in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in cultural studies*, (Edited by Morley and Chen), 1996: Routledge. Pg. 37

firms are class neutral; elite employers simply seek to hire “the best and the brightest.” But in practice. . . Firms define talent in a manner that excludes high-performing students from less privileged backgrounds and use evaluative metrics correlated with parental socioeconomic status to screen applicants and make hiring decisions. Because of the way they hire, these employers end up systematically excluding smart, driven, and social skilled students from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds from the highest-paying entry-level jobs in the United States, positions that serve as gateways to the country’s economic elite. In doing so, they contribute to an increasingly rigid American stratification system in which social origins predict social destinations and upward mobility is less common than in many other Western, industrialized nations.⁷⁸

Her conclusion is that education is not a social level and equalizer at all (she showed that having an elite degree did nearly nothing to mitigate these class-based hiring practices), but that, instead, “elite organizations have developed newer, subtler, seemingly more legitimate screens to ensure a socially and culturally homogeneous workforce”⁷⁹ that are much harder to identify, let alone fight against (as, for example, in current anti-discrimination laws in the case of race, disability, and gender). Culture (and cultural values as determined by those in power) shapes this process directly in terms of the construction and content of meritocracy. Importantly, these definitions shift according to the interests of groups in power: Rivera discusses how 1920’s anti-Semitism within universities changed the definition of merit from high performance on tests to someone’s “manly and social character” (9). Similarly, racism towards African-Americans in this same era had scientists measuring skulls in a vain attempt to find biological differences based on race.

The result is a somewhat more ethnically and religiously (and she argues racially) diverse elite strata that still is rooted in a small elite social class background; only making it *appear* that, once again, the class structure is giving way while it is really being more entrenched as a paradoxical “aristocracy of merit” (275):

This type of movement projects an image of porousness and makes selection seem bias free and based on ability rather than social origin. It also generates a tolerance for inequality because it creates perceptions that spots at the top are deserved. Yet in reality, despite these small numbers of cases and the popular narratives that celebrate them, movement from the very bottom to the very top of the economic ladder has become exceedingly rare.⁸⁰

Rivera borrows this term from sociologist Michael Young’s satire *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, where a fictionalized future England has based all school and work placements on a

⁷⁸ Rivera, Lauren A. 2015. *Pedigree: how elite students get elite jobs*. Princeton University Press: Pg. 267.

⁷⁹ Rivera 2015, pg. 275-276

⁸⁰ Rivera 2015, Pg. 276

strict merit-based system of intelligence tests. The intention of this system was to equalize the opportunities in society, but ends up deepening even further the class hierarchy: “only existing elites have the resources and opportunities necessary to cultivate high test scores in their children,” (276) showing the dystopic outcome of Bourdieu’s insight on the school as a site where only those given the keys in advance can unlock the privilege and opportunity within education. The cultural studies framework complicates the work of Bourdieu and Rivera a step further, to account for the very real unpredictability and creative action – the “line of radical indeterminacy”⁸¹ – on the part of individuals (acting alone or within a social group) that takes place within these larger determining realities.

C. Critical Cultural Studies Framework: Raymond Williams, Paul Willis & the political potentials of adult education

This section discusses the specific theoretical contributions I will be borrowing from cultural studies, and the analytical approach that will be employed in the findings section. There is no one defining or essential ‘framework’ to be employed within cultural studies. Instead, according to Hall, it is considered as more of an intellectual *project* that takes shape in the space it operates in – this includes national political context, social movements, and the academic environment.⁸² However, to claim that a project is a cultural studies project is to take up a certain position and perspective within your analysis. Hall writes:

...what is distinctive about a cultural studies perspective? I think the question of the politics of culture or the culture of politics is somewhere close to this notion, of what is at the center of cultural studies. There are other elements, breaking across the traditional ones: for example, the attention to all those voices, positions, experiences which have been ruled out of any dominant intellectual political formation, etc. One could gather a number of broad structuring principles of the field without operating them in a ‘policing way’. . . One always has to remember that cultural studies is not an island on its own. It takes its coloration from social and cultural forces, especially if you are interested in the political articulation of cultural studies. One has to have in mind the cultural and political space in which cultural studies is obliged to operate. . . Until you go to cultural studies through these structures, *not from within cultural studies itself but from these externalities*, you don’t really translate it, you just borrow it, renovate it, play at recasting it.⁸³ [emphasis mine]

⁸¹ Willis 2004: 172-175

⁸² Hall, Stuart, “Cultural Studies and the politics of internationalization,” in *Critical Dialogues*, 1996: 396-397.

⁸³ Hall, Stuart, “Cultural Studies and the politics of internationalization,” in *Critical Dialogues*, 1996: 396-397.

This thesis topic has been approached with this stance in mind: that the community college cannot be isolated from broader social forces in analysis; that the materiality and objective reality of the institution is just as embedded in processes of cultural politics (culture and power) as the media or technology or any other institution in society; and that, cultural studies as an intellectual project is actually useful to understanding these cultural and political relationships that shape the community college in a new way.

Further, to say that your project is a “critical” cultural studies project is not to necessarily designate its genealogy in Britain, or even in the Birmingham School, but rather to designate that it will contain a certain relationship to cultural politics, which is about centering somewhere in the analysis the issues of culture and power:

...from the 1960s onward in Britain, cultural studies has always reflected on the relation between culture and politics, the symbolic and the social, in a distinctive way. It is not that other forms of cultural studies need to borrow or imitate that, but they need to think about how that articulation can be maintained in different contexts. *We are talking about how cultural studies is distinctive as an epistemic field...*In a sense, if there is anything to be learnt from British cultural studies, it's that: the insistence that cultural studies is always about the articulation – in different contexts, of course – between culture [as in signifying practices] and power.⁸⁴ [emphasis mine]

In the North American context, this articulation between culture and power in the cultural studies project has been mostly maintained in nontraditional academic spaces and barely calls itself ‘cultural studies,’ although the dimensions of a “cultural studies perspective” – as articulated by Hall, as in an epistemic space struggling to understand culture and power as central to the operation of daily life – exist in full and rigorous expression. The focus is on what cultural studies may potentially be useful for, and that is how it's life is extended. The formal academic space, on the other hand, while adopting the ‘cultural studies’ label (and even the ‘critical cultural studies’ label) has not adopted the stance amidst it's preoccupation with professionalization regimes, social status and hierarchy, and reproduction of the academic labor force. The main anxiety is around cultural studies as a *discipline* – i.e., it's future within the academy and what innovative and theoretically sophisticated projects may be useful to extending its life as a professional discipline.

1. Raymond Williams and Adult Education

⁸⁴ Hall, Stuart, “Cultural Studies and the politics of internationalization,” in *Critical Dialogues*, 1996: 395.

“I’ve often defined my own social purpose as the creation of an educated and participating democracy. The WEA taught me much in defining these terms.”

–Raymond Williams, open letter, 1961

To begin the theoretical section with Raymond Williams’ biography of his time as an adult lecturer in the Workers Education Association (WEA) from the early 1940’s to the 1960’s is critically important, as this was central to his theoretical work and makes a case for expanding our discussion of the social role of the community college in a similar way. Williams has said that the tradition of adult education was “one of the best and deepest traditions in Britain.”⁸⁵ In *Border Country: Raymond Williams and Adult Education*, John McIlroy is one of the only authors to biography Williams’ work as an adult educator and its connections to larger political change in the country, and importance to his developing body of cultural theory:

It is a commonplace that borders – between working-class community and the life of the intellect, country and city, England and Wales – permeate and structure Williams’ life and production, and critics have noted, if only in passing, that the years of his professional youth, lived on the ‘periphery of the academic establishment,’ in the borderland between England’s oldest university and the wider community were ‘crucial for the development of his work.’ Williams himself reflected, ‘I first started to look at the idea of culture in an adult education class.’ (McIlroy 1990: 1)

Given that Williams developed the Marxist theory of cultural materialism within cultural studies, this is a crucial point, yet often overlooked in reviews and retrospectives of his corpus of work, except for mentions in brief notes.⁸⁶ Williams’ own reflections confirms the centrality of adult education to the genesis of his social theories and their profound influence on cultural studies. In his own words:

We are beginning, I am afraid, to see encyclopedia articles dating the birth of cultural studies from this or that book in the late fifties. Don’t believe a word of it. That shift of perspective about the teaching of arts and literature and their relation to history and contemporary society began in adult education, it didn’t happen anywhere else. At its best it has truly contributed to change itself and continues to contribute in a social order which has more need of it, being less conscious of its real situation than, I think, has ever been the case. For this is a social order which really does not know in what crucial respects it is ignorant, in what crucial respects it is incompletely conscious and therefore, in what crucial respects this collaborative process of adult education is still central.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ McIlroy 1990, Part 2: 13

⁸⁶ McIlroy 1990: 2

⁸⁷ R. Williams, “Adult education and social change” in *WEA SouthEastern District, Adult Education and Social Change.* Lectures and Reminiscences in Honour of Tony McLean, n.d. (probably 1983), pgs. 18-24. Quoted in McIlroy: 1990, Pg.2

Adult Education ‘Tutors’ (instructors) had to constantly negotiate between upper worlds of high theory and the practical experience of their students yet, according to Williams, this was a strength: “the contradictions could work for the adult educator if he or she was willing to develop some of the insights which flowed from the collision of codified knowledge with the experience and concerns of the student.”⁸⁸ This “pioneering,” in fact, is one of the unwritten histories of the development of critical cultural studies. It has not only had an impact theoretically and philosophically within cultural studies, but also within the practical labor of teaching. The best-recognized educators today continue to use Williams’ ethic (whether they know it is attributed to him or not) of bringing art, literature and other forms of contemporary popular culture, into discussion with the largest political and social changes of our time to both utilize and interrupt students’ own understandings. Importantly, Williams never assumed that his students would be too stupid to learn these theories or that all they needed was a ‘practical’ education directly related to the skills they needed on their jobs:

[I resist] the anti-educational notion that you should soften the terms of the discussion; the anti-educational notion that you should exclude controversial material. There was also the support of certain subjects, in that period and since, precisely because they moved away from these areas which would put the status and nature of official learning in question.⁸⁹ [85]

Instead, he saw that it was just as important for the working class (which he was strongly identified with, as it was in his own upbringing⁹⁰) to be educated in the liberal arts just as the upper classes were, and that only an education based in a socially democratic framework, for *everyone*, would bring about political and social change.

Williams was teaching adult education classes in literature and communication for the WEA at Oxford during a time when England’s education system was undergoing changes that

⁸⁸ McIlroy 1990: 14

⁸⁹ 6. R. Williams, “Adult education and social change” in WEA SouthEastern District, *Adult Education and Social Change*. Lectures and Reminiscences in Honour of Tony McLean, n.d. probably 1983, p.17. Quoted in McIlroy 1990:10

⁹⁰ McIlroy has written of this aspect of Williams’ biography and identification with the working class: “Williams had entered adult education so as to make his passage from the working class only partial; so that he could help those who, unlike himself, had not negotiated the ladder of individual attainment successfully; and so that he could play a role in replacing the ladder which individualized, divided, inferiorized and disorientated the workers and forging means for raising, not a small number of individuals, but the whole class. What deeply disturbed him was the fashion in which the individual ladder was used against those who were left behind and the class as a whole . . . Williams's general answers -- an expanded education, a comprehensive education, an end to the private sector, a common and transformed curriculum -- were not to resolve these problems, which were rooted in a class society. But they haunt his thoughts and his own writings on the organization and philosophy of adult education which were fragmentary and scattered down the years.” [McIlroy1990 part 2: Pg. 12]

closely parallel today's neoliberal transformation of public education in the United States. Wartime in England had uprooted people's radicalism and, though there was a strong socialist movement among activists, workers, intellectuals and students; there was also the deep insecurities and divisions produced by a changing post-war economy. New forms of "affluence, consumerism, privatization, depoliticization, and instrumentalism of the working class"⁹¹ was turning the social democratic liberal arts ideal of education into more of a professional-technical and management-oriented ideal, with more focus on serving the middle and 'leisure' classes. In fact, Williams remarks that from 1939 to 1960, during this period of change, the number of working class students attending the WEA decreased by half.⁹² Williams says of teaching during this time:

The WEA started to become heavily used by the middle classes as a form of leisure and education. There was nothing wrong with this, except that in socially mixed communities they induced a quite different cultural atmosphere from that of the working class student...all the time there was constant pressure from the university: you must improve academic standards, you must get written work... the effect was to tend to eliminate people without secondary education.⁹³

A similar parallel exists, although in a different context, not only in the community college but throughout American higher education today. As national funding for higher education lessens, universities are forced to privatize, which means cutting out working class students in favor of drawing in affluent students who's families can contribute to annual funds. Drawing in affluent students not only means giving them bigger financial aid packages than they award to working class students,⁹⁴ but also the building of posh dorms and other leisure amenities.⁹⁵ There is no doubt this lessening of economic diversity changes the larger cultures of the university. Because community colleges exist in an unacknowledged relationship to four-year universities, structural changes affecting the four-year also affect the community college, in perhaps a more drastic way: in the same way the WEA became "heavily used by the middle classes," community colleges are now increasingly used by middle class students who are opting

⁹¹ McIlroy 1990:5

⁹² From 30% to 15%. S. Raybould, *University Extra Mural Education in England 1945-62.. A Study In Finance and Policy*, Michael Joseph, 1964, p 74. Quoted in McIlroy 1990: 5.

⁹³ R. Williams, *Politics and Letters.* Interviews with *New Left Review*, Verso, 1979, p. 80, 81.

⁹⁴ Clawson & Leiblum (2008) looked at these financial aid packages at UMass Amherst, and found that 2/3 of financial aid goes to students in the top 10% of incomes. Conversely, students at the lower end of incomes get mostly loan packages.

⁹⁵ Dan Clawson & Mishy Leiblum (2008) *Class Struggle in Higher Education*, *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 41:1, 12-30, DOI: 10.1080/10665680701776241

out of the cost of four-years.⁹⁶ And community college administrative officials are all too enthusiastic to pull these higher-valued, better-prepared middle class students in, restructuring the institution in subtle and not-so-subtle ways that are not conducive to the existing working class population (more on these changes will be discussed in the findings).

A last important point to make about the importance of adult education to Williams biography is a theoretical distinction he made about the overall political aims of his teaching: whether teaching should be towards bringing an existing 'high-class culture' to the working class, or whether education should be working to actively develop, or perhaps consolidate an already existing, distinctive working-class culture. These questions were also developing alongside larger ones about the effects of increasing commercial culture on both of these forms. In that period of increasingly imposed professionalization and privatization, Williams confronted and debated the question of whether objective educational standards should be imposed on adult education. Williams thought that the 'ladder' of traditional university education was not meant to educate a large number of people, but was designed only to let a small amount through. Adult education stood in stark contrast to this with its formal policy of open-admissions, however, he argued that the imposition of external academic standards would change the culture of adult education from one of openness to exclusion and rankings, from "expanding an existing elite rather than contributing to the ending of elites."⁹⁷ McIlroy writes:

How could one capture statically the quality of living educational growth? Standards was a 'bullying word' and the practice of standards would impose an unnecessary sieve on the adult education involvement of workers. Williams thus observed the degree to which adult education was becoming more and more an alternative ladder, another individual route in, not an alternative for those who had to, or wished to, stay out together.⁹⁸

It was not so much the fact of educating adults, but rather that adult education was significant because it was one of the only forms of independent working-class education in the country. The imposition of standards by external authorities not only meant the beginnings of erosion of this independence, but also, for Williams, a form of social control, explaining that, "powerholders had sought to use adult education as a method of controlling the working class

⁹⁶ This trend is only increasing. According to the National Student Clearinghouse, 46 percent of students who graduated with a four-year degree during the 2013-14 school year had been enrolled at a two-year institution at some point in the previous 10 years. Of those students, 65 percent enrolled for at least three semesters at a community college.

⁹⁷ McIlroy 1990, part 2: 11

⁹⁸ McIlroy 1990, part 2: 12

through finance and the authority of the teacher.”⁹⁹

Today this discussion happens in the increasingly corporatized community college setting in the form of enrollment numbers. As one example, each community college in my sample was considering cutting remedial classes (these are below 100-level courses meant to remediate the student up to college-level material) as they cost the community college money and do not serve the increasingly middle class population (those priced out of four-years) the community college is trying to attract. Bill Messner, President of Holyoke Community College, in discussion about diving enrollment and new statewide budget standards that tied funding of the community college to performance, stated after proposing cuts to remedial courses, “Receiving students who are not prepared for college courses are a drain on our resources, impacts our performance, and affects our funding as well.”¹⁰⁰ Helping underprepared students come up to college speed is ‘draining’, yet, creating costly courses and programs for the sole purpose of training casino workers or other specific corporate sites is well within the budget.¹⁰¹ These are parallel dynamics to Williams political struggles teaching in the WEA.

Williams lost the battle against the university’s imposition of external standards on adult education and left his post in 1961, when adult education courses were being changed from their radical social-democratic aims and working-class character to narrowly vocational ‘management refresher’ courses. Writing of this time, Williams says:

Over the years there, in the end, occurred a pretty successful conversion of the WEA into something that could be indifferently called Further Education: any other emphasis was deflected except in certain specialized areas of trade union education. That only became clear to me when I moved to Oxford in 1961 ... a plan was unfolded - it was quite explicit - to create a residential college in Wellington Square whose focus would be on refresher courses for young graduates who had gone into industrial management and so on. This was suddenly no longer the mixed situation I had lived in for fourteen years. When they moved to institutionalize these dreadful refresher courses for managers then of course adult education ceased to have enough meaning...It was at this point that I knew that I wanted to move on.¹⁰²

Williams’ argument that adult education was part of public education, not “expanding productivity nor [relevant to] to increasing the efficiency of the society in direct terms,”¹⁰³ strikes at the heart of the community college social reproduction debate and the policy and

⁹⁹ McIlroy 1990, part 2: 14

¹⁰⁰ BOT HCC – meeting notes. May 26th, 2015

¹⁰¹ See BOT meeting transcripts

¹⁰² R. Williams, *Politics and Letters*. Interviews with *New Left Review*, Verso, 1979, p 81. Quoted in McIlroy 1990, part 2: 15

¹⁰³ R. Williams, 'The common good', *Adult Education*, XXXIV, 1961, p 1925. Quoted in McIlroy 1990, Part 2: 15

political changes the community college, along with all of higher education, is caught up in. Instead, Williams was committed to a vision of the WEA's function as "the extension of democracy and the deepening of the quality of active participation in society,"¹⁰⁴ which is a wholly new framework in which to cast the social role of the community college institution.

2. Learning to Labor

"...the themes and emphases of Learning to Labor...seem to me of most use for understanding the current conjuncture." –Paul Willis, 2004

Paul Willis researched and wrote *Learning to Labor* from 1972 to 1975 on a group of working class boys as they navigated from the world of school to the world of work. His ethnographic account comprises two sections: description of the counterculture of the 'lads' as they develop against the workings of the school, and the attendant meanings that rise up around their activities, relationships and trajectories into the workforce (mainly factory work, as this was the last generation to experience manual industrial labor before the United Kingdom lost the majority of its manufacturing jobs, as is now the case across the industrialized economies). The ethnographic material Willis collected is then developed in the theoretical section towards a "theory of cultural forms." The theory is developed to answer the question of the relation between the social mobility or social reproduction potential of the school and the cultural forms that its institutional workings and structures of authority give rise to (as embodied by the lads' counterculture); and whether and how these internal cultural forms affect meanings and behaviors in relationship to social reproduction. It attempts also to account for the contradictory dynamics around this reproduction: why, in Willis' words, do the lads experience their insertion into an exploitative labor system (which ultimately preserves the class system they rebel against) as a free and willing choice? How to account for the bewildering condition of the 'lads', that is their 'entering of an unfree condition freely'? It is this theory of cultural forms, which he later described as a "three stage model of cultures and class,"¹⁰⁵ which could be useful to today's higher education research landscape, but that also directly addresses a central problem around the study of community colleges: the mechanistic 'either-or' framework about community colleges and whether they ultimately entrap or free working class students. Willis himself argues for the

¹⁰⁴ McIlroy 1990, part 2: 14

¹⁰⁵ See Willis in Dolby and Dimitriadis, 2004: 168

continued relevance of *Learning to Labor's* analysis to our current historical conjuncture, while admitting that it needs to be expanded and adapted to the specificities of different kinds of groups and situations, and to our national U.S. labor and political context:

The whole working class has been badly affected by the diminution in both the quality and quantity of jobs available, especially young people, older workers, and ethnic minorities. Perhaps especially in the United States, where the minorities now make the majority of the working class in some major cities, race stereotyping and prejudice increase the likelihood of economic exclusion for Black and Latino groups as well as adding extra barbs of stigma to the condition of unemployment. From the point of view of the working class and from all its age and ethnic constituencies, work opportunities have shifted away from relatively abundant, well- to reasonably-paid skilled or semiskilled industrial work, to much lower paid service and out-of-reach white-collar work. For reasons of culture and disposition only too well analyzed in *Learning to Labor*, the new high-tech jobs and the higher level training and educational programs designed to fill them are irrelevant to most of the displaced and to-be displaced manual industrial workers. . . These dramatic changes have destroyed or substantially weakened working-class paths from school to work and have shaken the material foundations of traditional working-class cultural forms.¹⁰⁶

This section will attempt to show how Willis' three-stage theory of cultural forms framework can give us a way out of the circular debate around social reproduction and community colleges, and also lead to deeper and more productive questions about the social role of the community college and students' place and experience within it, as it takes place in the larger national context that Willis describes above. First, I will offer a short summary of the ethnographic work that constitutes the first half of *Learning to Labor*.

The ethnography consists of a case study of twelve non-academic working class boys from a "good" but lower level secondary modern school (this was before the UK's complete reorganization of the secondary education system).¹⁰⁷ The school was located in the "rough and dirty" industrial town with a majority industrial proletariat, involved in manufacturing jobs of some kind. The town itself was what Willis called, "an archetypal industrial town. It has all the classic industrial hallmarks as well as those of modern monopoly capitalism in conjunction with a proletariat which is just about the oldest in the world."¹⁰⁸ The boys were explicitly chosen for their membership in an "oppositional culture"¹⁰⁹ within the working class school, which Willis

¹⁰⁶ Willis in Dolby and Dimitriadis, 2004: 182 - 183

¹⁰⁷ British secondary schools moved from a system of extensive and early selection and tracking in secondary schools to one with comprehensive schools during the 1960's and 70's. Before the reform, students at age eleven would take an exam which determined whether they would attend an academically-oriented grammar school or a lower level secondary (vocational) school. The reform took many years, and both secondary school systems coexisted during the 1960's and 70's, the time of Willis' research.

¹⁰⁸ Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor*, 1977: 6

¹⁰⁹ Willis 1977: 4

termed the “counter school culture” (represented as ‘the lads’). It is not that the boys were not academically capable, but that they collectively practiced an unarticulated opposition to the culture of authority, meritocracy, and individualism that the school promoted; they lived out the knowledge that “a few can make it. The class can never follow.”¹¹⁰ Counter school culture “thus provides an eye to the glint of steel beneath the usual institutional kerfuffle of school. It has its own specific practices but it also searches out and critically exposes some of the crucial social transactions and contradictions within education.”¹¹¹

Willis found that three things defined ‘the lads’ counter school culture. The first being a refusal of conformism and obedience to the school culture, as well as a refusal of the associated rewards of this conformism (such as earning good grades, the ability to move up to the next level, and credentials and certificates). Implicit in this refusal was a critique of meritocracy and the social mobility education promised:

In the first place there is a common educational fallacy that opportunities can be made by education, that upward mobility is basically a matter of individual push, that qualifications make their own openings. Part of the social democratic belief in education even seems to be that the aggregate of all these opportunities created by the upward push of education actually transforms the possibilities for all the working class, and so challenges the class structure itself. In fact, of course, opportunities are created only the upward pull of the economy, and then only in relatively small numbers for the working class. . . No conceivable number of certificates amongst the working class will make for a classless society, or convince industrialists and employers – even if they were able – that they should create more jobs. It may well be argued that...the proliferation of various certificates for working class occupants is more about obscuring the meaningless nature of work and constructing false hierarchies and binding people into them ideologically, than it is about creating or reflecting, the growth of more demanding jobs.¹¹²

The second feature of the lads’ counter school culture is not only to see past this ‘illusory nature’ of credentials and certificates but to see through to the real meaning of work, that “most work in industry is basically meaningless.” Instead of submitting totally to work, the lads’ work on “maintaining a relevance at another level.” Willis writes on the evidence supporting this counter-cultural ethic, and it is just as evident today as in the 70’s:

More than ever today the concrete forms of most jobs are converging into standard forms. They require very little skill or training from their incumbents, and cannot offer realistic opportunities for intrinsic satisfaction. Despite the rearguard action of job restructuring and job enrichment, the overwhelming weight of the evidence is that more and more jobs are being deskilled, standardized and intensified.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Willis 1977: 128

¹¹¹ Willis 1977: 126

¹¹² Willis 1977:126-127

¹¹³ Willis 1977:127

The third feature of the lads' counter culture is the distinction and privileging of the group over the individual, and "that the logic of class or group interests is different from the logic of individual interests."¹¹⁴ According to Willis, contained in this practice is a real knowledge on the objective conditions of class society, namely that individualistic mobility – although meaningful to certain individual members – ultimately means nothing for the group:

...the counter-school culture 'knows' much better than the state and its agencies what to expect – elitist exclusion of the mass through spurious recourse to merit. The counter-school culture and other working class cultural forms contain elements towards a profound critique of the dominant ideology of individualism in our society. . . In particular, the counter-school culture identifies the false individualistic promises of dominant ideology as they operate in the school.¹¹⁵

Willis calls each of these features of the counter school culture 'cultural penetrations' – these are the collective practices, or critiques in action, that the counter cultural group engages in which express an *unarticulated* ideology, and which pose problems to the social realities it is countering against. These are unselfconscious practices or 'impulses' which can 'see into' and uncover the objective reality of the structure which they arise from. Unlike Bourdieu's concept of "habitus," a cultural penetration encompasses both subjectivity and action. Willis writes:

"'Penetration' is meant to designate impulses within a cultural form towards the penetration of the conditions of existence of its members and their position within the social whole . . . 'Limitation' is meant to designate those blocks, diversions and ideological effects which confuse and impede the full development and expression of these impulses. . . 'partial penetration' is meant to designate the interaction of these two terms in a concrete culture. Ethnography describes the field of play in which the impulses and limitations combine but cannot isolate them theoretically or show them separately."¹¹⁶

Although as collective beliefs and practices, these penetrations are insightful into real social conditions, on an individual level they lead to entrapment (at least in the lads' cases). Willis argues that the entrapment itself, although appearing irrational, has a logical basis and, on a wider level, even structures the whole of the class system: "It is, I would argue, only this contradictory double articulation which allows a class society to exist in liberal and democratic forms: for an unfree condition to be entered freely."¹¹⁷ Unlike the American context, where the cultural belief in meritocracy works to paradoxically strengthen the hegemony of the class system, Willis found that cultural beliefs and ideologies forged in direct opposition to the class

¹¹⁴ Willis 1977:128

¹¹⁵ Willis 1977: 128

¹¹⁶ Willis 1977:119

¹¹⁷ Willis 1977: 120

structure (and not under a sort of appearance and belief of hard work and hope of making it) can strengthen existing power relationships.

3. The relationship of culture and class

One of Willis' most important analytical contributions was his careful treatment of the complex relationship between culture and social class. Writing in 2004 on the relevance of *Learning to Labor* to today's conjuncture, he distilled his analysis into a three-stage model to outline his conception of class and how it relates to culture. The model is for the purpose of heuristics only, an attempt to "freeze the world so that its complex and dialectical relations of parts, normally in ceaseless and relativized motion, are stopped in our thoughts."¹¹⁸ This is not an exercise in oversimplification or reductiveness, but an effort to keep the analysis empirically grounded. For Willis, culture is the "materially symbolic patterns and associated practices of human meaning making in context, which cannot be reduced to a reflex of something else – individual psychology, "discourses," or the economy."¹¹⁹

Within this model, the first effort that must be made is to locate the class elements within the analysis. What Willis means by this is that the first stage of analysis must look at the 'basic' ways that social groups are separated by differences in power (including capital). In this first stage, the working class is seen as in a subordinate position to those exercising power/capital, and this subordinate position echoes throughout a variety of institutions beyond the sphere of production. Although Willis recognizes the limitations of this level of analysis, he does hold it as crucial:

For "culture" to be effective as a notion, to give it some "go" and to show the social work that it accomplishes, there must be some things that are "not culture"; this is actually to show precisely the *autonomy* of culture, that is, *the manner of its autonomy with respect to something else . . .* But unless there is a moment in our analysis that separates larger forces and relations we are in danger of presenting a depthless view of the world...¹²⁰

What this first level of analysis does is freeze the "irreducible humanness" of dominant and subordinated groups in order to get at the cruder underlying workings of their relationship (the "economistic stage," as Willis terms it). The second level of analysis purposes to bring the cultural and subjective human elements that are at play back into movement, and it is here where

¹¹⁸ Willis 2004: 170

¹¹⁹ Willis 2004:169

¹²⁰ Willis 2004:171

I utilize Willis' central contribution of the notion of *cultural production* (within which is included 'cultural penetrations,' 'partial penetrations,' and 'limitations'). Here, culture refers very specifically to "the active process of "meaning-making" of social agents, their "making sense,""¹²¹ and it is the making sense of their identities and relationships within their economic position (i.e., conditions of existence):

At least in part, cultural practices are about forging viable identities and strategies for human dignity, development, and becoming in relationship to and through their conditions of existence, in so doing at their own level making sense of economic *positions* and *relations*.¹²²

It is not that people make these identities on their own or that they are simply born with them – they are not tied to biology, not tied to individual psychology, nor deterministic; but instead owe to an open-ended interplay between culture and structure. The cultural production we engage in supplies the "raw" symbolic materials:

There is a production process at the cultural level, a cultural production, that you could say is similar to material production in the labor process whereby humans engage in sensuous practices working on raw materials to produce new or refashioned things fit for useful human purpose. In this case, the "products" are meanings and expressions useful in themselves but also, in one way or another, useful for making sense of economic positions and relations...¹²³

The structure (first stage of analysis) has not fallen away, instead cultural production functions to "see into" or "penetrate" the real conditions of existence and provide ways the identity can grow against constraints. These penetrations are constantly taking place, and are happening in forms of 'good' and common sense; collective practices; style and aesthetics, values and attitudes, or any kind of knowledge embodied in practice and daily life. No matter what theories we have about determination in social life, Willis maintains that cultural productions are creative and unpredictable – the purpose of pursuing this analysis is never to "prefigure in advance...there is a line of radical indeterminacy"¹²⁴ to the course of events. So this second stage of analysis is cultural production as it reveals structural conditions ("conditions of existence") of its members.

The third stage recognizes that "maintenance" is required for the conditions of existence (positions and relations) to continue; that at the same time a cultural penetration can work to reveal the logic of the social system it has sprung from, it can also ironically contribute to its

¹²¹ Willis 2004: 171

¹²² Willis 2004: 171

¹²³ Willis 2004: 171

¹²⁴ Willis 2004: 172-175

perpetuation. On this point, Willis writes:

It is in this continuous dialectic of renewal and the reformation of the old . . . that social structures should be understood from an ethnographic point of view, leaving far behind the static “economistic” stage with which we started. Key ethnographic questions, therefore, concern not only how far cultural practices “make sense” of structural location but also how far these same practices ironically contribute toward the maintenance through time of those very power relations and interests. (Willis 2004: 174).

It is here, in the third stage, that the analysis is finally able to make sense of the lads’ contradictory position: their sense of reality about the larger system of meritocracy and individualism, yet their meaning-making (and subsequent practices) which ultimately enforce their subordinate position.

The basic elements of the three stages – conditions of existence; cultural production; reproduction – are seen as interdependent and simultaneous phenomenon. This plays out in reality in much more complicated ways, which is why Willis advocates for ethnography as a methodology capable of allowing for this complexity.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents a detailed description of the qualitative methodology and research design selected for this study, and gives rationale and explanation for the materials selected for analysis. It also describes the three data sets that constitute the bulk of research for this study, and why these three sets were important to be included. Also included in this chapter is a discussion of the limitations of the methodology employed, particularly when it comes to using interviews and how to analyze the claims put forth by interviewees about their own experience.

This study uses a partially ethnographic, mixed qualitative methodology composed of three types of data: student interviews, which peer into the student experience; community college board of trustee meetings, which peer into the administrative level; and public communication the community college uses primarily to increase enrollment (this includes branding campaigns, alumni catalogues, and other such materials), but also to inform current, past and potential students about the college's specific offerings. This allows us to look at the perceived place of the college within the regional higher education landscape.

A full ethnography would have required immersive time in the community college sites that this study could not undertake, although I attempted to pull together as many publically available data sources as possible to pursue an “interface ethnography” method. Interface ethnography was developed by media scholar Sherry Ortner in response to the difficulties of doing ethnographies on closed field sites. She defines it as a practice of “doing participant observation in the border areas where the closed community or organization or institution interfaces with the public.”¹²⁵ Although community colleges as institutions are not closed to the public nor to this kind of research (in fact, all sites at all levels – from faculty to administrative staff to students – were incredibly responsive, if not surprised, that someone wanted to study the community college), interface ethnography helps an entry into understanding basic ways an institution works, what relationships are important, and what the general political-economic landscape looks like. This can be helpful before defining the parameters of a fuller, longer-term and more immersive ethnography.

¹²⁵ Ortner, Sherry B. “Access: Reflections on Studying Up in Hollywood,” in *Ethnography*, 2010: 11, 211. DOI: 10.1177/1466138110362006

Why use ethnography to take up questions of culture, social reproduction, and the specific site and concerns of the community college student? According to Paul Willis, any research concern has a “cultural moment” that requires a theoretically sensitive, yet empirically rigorous, analysis:

No sociological, anthropological, educational, or cultural studies research project, no policy initiative can make sense without asking in some form or another: “What is the culture of the people with whom we are dealing?” “How do they make sense?” “How does the world look to them?” “What do they make of us looking at them?” So culture is worth recording in its own right but, *pace* my apparent empiricism, enjoys a further purchase because it also is a theoretical site.¹²⁶

In addition, the complex nature of Willis’ theoretical framework (the three stages of structure-cultural penetrations-reproduction), and the creative and unpredictable nature of lived cultural practices, requires going to the field:

Cultural forms are of intense interest for the post-disciplinary ethnographer not because they preserve a set of quaint customs and hypostasized self-maintaining values to be recorded for ethological and historical record but because they contain a certain cruciality in context, embedded and lived insights with respect to their own conditions of existence. . . The whole point of [going to the field] is to try to understand how particular subjects are making sense of themselves and their situations in ways that cannot be prefigured and that might “surprise” you. And that making sense must be of something, not of the moon, not of the stars, but of their daily life and the conditions of existence of their daily life, of their own situation and its possibilities.¹²⁷

It is only through “being there” that the double-‘purchase’ of cultural practices as offering both theoretical and empirical information can be realized and read against the structural conditions in which the participants are living in. Ethnography is the most comprehensive methodology for tapping into the multiple cultural dimensions of social reproduction.

Lauren Rivera’s study on how elite hiring firms use cultural signals – as various forms of “cultural capital,” encoded in body, dress, talk, hobbies, and physical action – over educational achievements or skill and intellect to select candidates from higher socioeconomic positions also stresses the importance of analyzing culture as a *central* component of any study wishing to understand reproduction, whether it is in education, the labor market, or other spheres:

Ongoing sociological debates about cultural capital in the United States operationalize the concept narrowly, concentrating on knowledge of or participation in highbrow artistic forms, such as classical music, opera, ballet, and fine arts. Yet highbrow artistic knowledge and participation are not the only forms of culture that are relevant for inequality. By studying stratification from the ground up, I reveal the cultural signals that gatekeepers to some of the nation’s highest-paying jobs use to make selection decisions. The signals they prized – prestigious university credentials,

¹²⁶ Willis 2004: 169

¹²⁷ Willis 2004: 172

high-status extracurricular activities, polished interactional styles, and personal narratives of passion, self-reliance, and self-actualization – were not artistic or highbrow but were indeed classed.¹²⁸

Richard Hoggart similarly worked to expand how conceptions of culture could and should be studied. Stuart Hall, in discussing the influence of Richard Hoggart on the Birmingham tradition of cultural studies, writes that a key theoretical turn was a conceptualization of culture as “ways of life,” broadening it out beyond just cultural texts, and thus as “a central and necessary part of the object of study.”¹²⁹ To get at the full context of a way of life – the meanings, practices, worldviews, beliefs, and perceptions within it – requires an approach that goes beyond a single-method approach such as analyzing semiotics within texts or interviewing. Hall identified four approaches to culture that Hoggart took: viewing culture as “ways of life” and “practices of making sense” (versus only as ‘highbrow’ or judgment-based); an insistence that these “ways of life” had to be looked at in their own context as a lived world (much as you do with the immersive techniques of ethnography) and not merely read off texts; culture as “a matter of meaning” that is both strapped to social reality and informs social practice; lastly, not stopping at just the empirical observation, but an attempt at analysis or interpretation, a “social hermeneutics,” should also be made. Quoting Hoggart, Hall writes:

...there was the methodological innovation evidenced in Hoggart’s adaptation of the literary-critical method of ‘close reading’ to the sociological task of interpreting the lived meanings of a culture. One says ‘sociological’, but clearly something more innovative than standard empirical sociological methods was required – nothing less than a kind of ‘social hermeneutics’ is implied in these interpretive procedures: “we have to try to see beyond the habits to what the habits stand for, to see through the statements to what the statements really mean (which may be the opposite of the statements themselves) to detect the differing pressures of emotion behind idiomatic phrases and ritualistic observances.”¹³⁰

This study attempts to apply a modified version of this “social hermeneutics,” or sociological reading of the lived culture, within the community college with a central focus on students experiences and meanings around their education.

A. Data Set 1: Interviews

¹²⁸ Rivera, Lauren A. 2015. *Pedigree: how elite students get elite jobs*. Princeton University Press: New Jersey. Pg. 268-269

¹²⁹ Hall, Stuart, “Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, and the cultural turn,” in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2007, Volume 10(1):39-49. DOI: 10.1177/1367877907073899

¹³⁰ Hall, *Uses of Literacy*, quoting Hoggart (Hoggart, 1958: 17).

Even though they share roughly equal halves of the total undergraduate population, and have an unacknowledged dependency¹³¹ on each other, there is very little dialogue between four-year universities and community colleges: it is a relationship of silence. On the one side, there is the four-year (either public or private) around which most national higher education policy implementation and press attention centers and unfolds. Here also is contained the image and discourse of the typical college student: the (largely white) male or female, just shy of their 20's, away from home for the first time and “frolicking. . . [in the] tree-lined idylls filled with prestigious libraries and terrible dining hall food.”¹³² Zachary Karabell, author of *What is College For? The Struggle to Define American Higher Education*, pushes back against this stereotypical image of higher education:

“[Most colleges are] one- and two-story industrial concrete buildings where millions of immigrants, middle-aged women, and lower-middle-class students are trying to obtain the degree that they hope will give them that ineluctable edge in the thrivaly insecure economy of the United States today.”¹³³

Similarly, in *The Future of Higher Education*, Dan Clawson and Max Page compare ‘typical’ college experiences:

...it can be deceptive to talk about the “typical” college experience. Let’s look in a little greater detail at four types of “bricks and mortar” colleges and universities: Harvard, a most competitive university; the University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass), a flagship public university; Pikeville College, a non-competitive private college; and Holyoke Community College (HCC). Two of these schools are private (Harvard, Pikeville) and two are public (UMass, HCC). Attending any of them is “going to college,” but what this means and what the experience involves can differ substantially. There is a dramatic class divide separating Harvard at the top, UMass and Pikeville in the middle, and Holyoke Community College at the low end.¹³⁴

The dominant stereotype doesn’t reflect the whole reality; but rather the wide separation between actual college experience for the majority of students in the numerous ‘industrial concrete buildings’ versus students that are more often invoked in national higher education policy and debate. The interviews in this study reveal that, in fact, the way higher education is

¹³¹ See for example Dougherty’s argument (1994) that four-year universities use local community colleges as buffer institutions to take the lower-performing / less affluent students. See also Clawson & Leiblum (2008) who write about UMass wanting to keep lower test-score students out (saying essentially it is the responsibility of “lesser colleges” to take them).

¹³² See article: Josh Freedman <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/joshfreedman/2013/09/20/the-typical-college-student-is-not-a-typical-college-student-and-other-fun-college-demographics-data/#51407b9bc43a>>

¹³³ Karabell, Zachary. 1998. *What’s College For? The Struggle to define American higher education*. Basic Books: New York: Pg. 8.

¹³⁴ Clawson, Dan and Page, Max. 2012. *The Future of Higher Education*, Routledge. Pg. 11

set up (with community colleges increasingly modeling themselves after four-years or otherwise shaping themselves to corporate agendas) is not the most fitting model for this type of student that Karabell describes (and my sample represents), and the structure of their lives.

The study began with an effort only around obtaining and analyzing interviews. The other two levels of materials were supplemented when I realized the central point that Willis makes about the limitations of ethnography applied also to this case in the interview scenario:

“In a sense this most central point of reference [the lived ‘insights’ of cultural penetrations] is an absent or at least silent centre beneath the splendid bedizenment of a culture. It is impossible to prove its rationality. No amount of direct questioning will elicit it from cultural participants. . . This is why the ethnography of visible forms is limited. The external, more obviously creative, varied and sometimes random features must be read back to their heart. The logic of a living must be traced to the heart of its conceptual relationships if we are to understand the social creativity of a culture. This always concerns, at some level, a recognition of, and action upon, the particularity of its place within a determinate social structure.”¹³⁵

The administrative and public communication data are an effort (though incomplete) to place the reports of students about their experience at the community college into a more concrete context – with each adding a different layer of political and cultural information to the central question motivating the interviews, which was simply in what ways does education appear through the perceptions of community college students? What are their experiences at the community college? The interviews contribute to our knowledge about students at community colleges on two levels. The first level deals with perception: of the community college student, the institution, and possible educational trajectories. The second level deals with these perceptions as they clash with the objective mechanisms of the institution: the structural and political changes occurring in the institution and echoing throughout the interviews. Although meaning, perception and experience is shot through all levels of data, their separation is not so easy.

There are a total of 25 interviews. Twelve students are from Holyoke Community College, ten students from Springfield Technical Community College, and three from Greenfield Community College, although only 21 used a uniform interview schedule (I had changed the schedule between the first three) so only those 21 will be included for analysis. Interviewees were found through snowball sampling: I asked each interviewee to introduce me to one other student. Interviews were conducted in an open-ended, semi-structured format, with me asking

¹³⁵ Willis 1977: 121

open-ended questions and specific follow-ups. The interview schedule consisted of 9 sections and 47 questions (although not all were applicable to all students). Total interview time ranged in between one hour to two hours. Consent forms were explained and given to sign at each interview, with an option for whether the interviewee was okay being recorded (everyone responded okay). See the appendix for full interview schedule. The demographics of the interviews are as follows:

- 14 females, 7 males
- White: 8
- Latino/a: 7 (Ethnicity or nationality subset: 1 Colombia, 1 El Salvador, 5 Puerto Rican)
- African-American: 2
- Mixed-race identified: 3
- Age ranges: half the sample was over age 25, with highest age being in 50's and youngest age being 19
- 5 working parents in sample
- 2 LGBTQ identified students
- Majors included: childhood education (1), pre-nursing (3), nutrition (1), paralegal (1), liberal arts and science arts transfer (these are students attempting to transfer on to four-year schools) (12), business (2), math (1). Students who are attempting and declare an Associate of Arts general transfer degree as their major are overrepresented in this sample.

Five case studies (thematic groups) of interest were identified within the interview sample, and will be used to structure the findings section: (1) Undocumented students: these are students within the sample who use the community college system to navigate their undocumented status and enter into higher education, as well as build a platform for political activism, particularly as pertains to the DREAM act. There are two students within this case study. (2) Ivy transfer: these are (majority white) female students who are attempting to use the community college as a springboard into local elite colleges, namely Smith College and Mount Holyoke. There are three students in this case study. (3) Vocational: these are students who are using the community college to enter right into the workforce (as opposed to completing a bachelor's degree). There are eight students in this case study. (4) Working parent: these are students who are balancing work, school and children. The majority of students within this case study is single and female (ranging in age from 19 years old to early 40's), with the exception of one male. There are five students in this case study. (5) UMass transfer: these are students who are transferring into UMass, and have already accepted admission. There are three students in this category. (These categories are overlapping). There is one student in this case study. These are not exhaustive of all the profiles within the interview sample, but will give a good range of

the perspectives that came up, and which have particular political urgency.

B. Data Set 2: Board of Trustee Meetings

To supplement the interview data, I attended most Board of Trustee meetings at each of the three colleges for one academic year (plus one summer) between September 2014 and August 2015. Recordings were made of each meeting and only meetings of interest to my study were transcribed. Some scheduling exceptions and holidays withstanding, the Board of Trustee meetings convened monthly and are open to the public. In attendance would be all relevant to the college at the administrative level: the president of the college and trustees, and occasionally some faculty depending on the meeting (mostly faculty were there on invitation to present on specific projects or dialogues). Every once in a while, an outstanding student would be invited to ‘tell their story’ and such narratives were used as evidence of the college’s success.

The BOT meetings opened up a cruder level of reality about the college: this is where funding cuts were regularly announced and debates ensued over allocation of money and educational priorities. Votes are taken on faculty hiring decisions, program cuts and infrastructure spending (this is to repair run down and not-up-to-code buildings – a problem for STCC in particular). Enrollment levels rising or falling was a near constant topic of discussion – always approached with alarm –and ways to inflate enrollment levels was a driving dynamic in almost every meeting. What emerged was a picture of the political economy of the community college institution: in the increasing absence of state funding for all of higher education (and the first to get slashed in state higher education budgets is community colleges), the little funding that does exist now gets tied to enrollment and performance levels.¹³⁶ Enrollment essentially becomes tied to the money available to the college. In addition, it is not just enrollment of anyone: the *type* of student becomes increasingly important, and changing program offerings to attract specifically “better prepared students.”¹³⁷ Thus the remedial function¹³⁸ that community colleges have traditionally played are being gutted in favor of programs that will attract a

¹³⁶ This performance-based funding is through the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education’s “Vision Project,” and is called a “performance incentive fund” which bases the amount of money that community colleges get on certain reported data such as enrollment levels, transfer-out rates, remediation rates, and retention and graduation rates.

¹³⁷ BOT/ STCC, meeting notes. May 2015

¹³⁸ Studies show that a full 1/3, or 67% of all community college students nationally, need to take one or more remedial courses. See: http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Publications/datapoints/Documents/DP_StudentPerception.pdf

different kind of student than the one the community college has traditionally served. The issues that emerged at this level of data will be interwoven in the findings section.

C. Data Set 3: Public Communication

Data set three includes any communication materials that were made available to the public by the community college: this includes flyers, letters, class catalogues and handouts to students; alumni catalogues; and institutional marketing and branding materials (for example, HCC had just launched a new branding campaign before the start of this study, and the strategy and motivations for selection of certain narratives over others was described in detail on their website). In the case of GCC, these public communications are archived and exist back to the founding of the college in the 1960's: looking them over shows just how much the college adapts and transforms from year-to-year, and how much this transformation is connected to the regional labor context, and broader national political context. However, for the purpose of this study, I made a decision to limit the time period of collection of materials to only the past five years.

In addition, because the New England region (and Hampshire county in particular) has an extensive network of colleges (public, private, community, for-profit, and everything in between), and because these institutions exist and speak to students in unacknowledged relationship to each other, I included a limited sample of public materials from other colleges in the area – one 'elite' liberal arts college (Smith College), one four-year private college (Bay Path College) which includes a focus on vocational education, and one four-year public university (University of Massachusetts Amherst). The purpose of this addition was to include a counterpoint or comparison in how the cultural narrative is constructed for different types of students: what are students told about their future possibilities depending on where they go? How are students 'interpellated', or grabbed, based on a perceived identity or social background, depending on whether they choose a liberal arts or vocational path? How does this language show up in the students' own interviews and understanding of their education? For example, Smith College materials do not talk to students in terms of economic necessity, workforce conditions and security (as the community college materials overwhelmingly do), nor in terms of their closeness to finally achieving the 'American dream'; but rather focus on the global social power and status that will be gained by attending their institution. UMass Amherst uses a mixture of economic improvement (although not security) and social empowerment messages.

Bay Path, somewhat like the community colleges, focuses on very concrete and specific workforce trajectories and images. Another newer strategy at HCC, along with the workforce development imagery, is for the advertising materials to focus on “transformation” of the student not just intellectually, but personally: this has turned out to be a powerful marketing tool that articulates a drive for change within the students to their image as an institution, and even shows up in the interviewees’ discussions of their experience. These differences and comparisons will be focused on in more depth in the findings section.

Just as important as the narrative the school is trying to present, is how their intended audience – the students – understand and react to it. Stuart Hall discusses this tension in between texts and readers:

It follows that the effects of cultural products cannot be ‘read off’ or inferred from the contents of what is produced for them to consume because, to have ‘effects’ of any depth, they must enter into and be in active negotiation with an already fully elaborated cultural world. Reading, in this sense, is always a cultural practice.¹³⁹

In order for a cultural product to be read and understood, or to grab a subject to begin with, it must work along the lines of a general cultural context in place already. Would a Smith College catalogue’s images, mistakenly placed on an HCC ad, be read or interacted with in the same way? Although the study cannot answer this question specifically, it is to illustrate that these materials will not be used to analyze the content in and of itself, but rather to see how they fit and work within the larger “ways of life” of the community college and students within it.

D. Limitations

The complexities involved in accounting for this conception of culture are too immense, both theoretically and empirically, for a study of this size and scope. While ethnography is a comprehensive and generous methodology when done thoroughly, this study only takes a partial ethnographic approach (in the version of “interface ethnography”). The three-level data set does attempt to capture narrow slivers of the complexity within social reproduction of inequality as experienced culturally by students, despite being limited. However, many methodological issues are aroused, particularly as concerns the methods’ ability to address the central research

¹³⁹ Hall, Stuart, “Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, and the cultural turn,” in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2007, Volume 10(1):39-49. DOI: 10.1177/1367877907073899

questions. A reminder of the driving research questions:

- 1) In what ways do community colleges facilitate simultaneous (versus ‘either-or’) social reproduction and social mobility, and how is it experienced by students?
- 2) How do community colleges represent the potential for students’ social mobility through their public communication? What aspects of social mobility do these materials and narratives focus on?
- 3) How do current community college students interpret their possible future opportunities in light of the above two aspects? What are the perceived benefits and limitations of a community college education according to students’ perspectives?

I argue that each data set is included to address an aspect of each question: The first question is addressed by the Board of Trustee meeting data and student interviews – here it is crucial to understand how the institutional level (a sort of small-scale ‘political economy,’ so to speak) and individual lives interact together to produce the experiences around social mobility through the community college. The second question is addressed by the third data set of public communication: this is not focused on teasing out the lived, felt experience of social mobility, but rather the *possibilities* that are offered through narrative, images, and ideas. These possibilities do exist, as all cultural narratives or stories, as the limiting framework through which people make meaning (the “raw material,” as Willis puts it). The third question is addressed primarily by student interview data, but supplemented again with institutional data and always contextualized within an attempted broader cultural analysis.

A fundamental methodological concern aroused in ethnographic or qualitative work, and particularly in interviews, is the matching up of what people *say* and what people *do*. The disparity here is between stated understandings that rise to the surface; versus embedded practices that often have deeper, more contradictory “insights,” and whose understandings are unavailable, or even unconscious. Paul Willis discusses this point extensively as it pertains to analyzing the unpredictable nature of cultural penetrations a group engages in:

One of the most profound reasons why this social creativity cannot be expressed rationally at the surface of the culture is that it is truly only half the story. It really does not proceed with a pure expressive purpose from the center of the culture. *We must posit the penetration as a clean and coherent insight in order to say what it is, but the concrete forms of cultures, as ethnography insistently reminds us, do not allow single pure dynamics.* In their very formation these ‘insights’ are distorted, turned and deposited into other forms...¹⁴⁰ [emphasis mine]

This study is centering the perspectives of students, and attempting to make an analysis from this basis only. A further stage of this study would need to take on the level of student

¹⁴⁰ Willis 1977: 121

practices– cultural productions in the form of ‘penetrations’ and ‘limitations,’ and the insights contained therein. Interpretation would then be based on the triangulation of observed practice, interviews, and institutional realities (modeled after Willis’ analytical three-stage model, discussed in the literature review, of structure--cultural production--reproduction). Stuart Hall wrote about this methodological issue of the importance and limitations of the subjective dimension within cultural studies. Throughout his career, he often spoke and wrote about his own personal biography as important to his intellectual work, recognizing that “our own personal experiences intersect with [larger social structures], but they don’t cover it.”¹⁴¹

Also, despite the methodological time and difficulty, it is desperately needed to do a *longitudinal* qualitative study of community college students and their various pathways over five or ten years – this data currently does not exist on any level (books, published peer-reviewed papers, or otherwise), and it is necessary to find out what happens after students transfer or enter the workforce, and how both their life path and socioeconomic trajectory was affected, as well as how their perspectives on their community college experience changed. For example, many of my interviewees were at transitional stages in their education (about to transfer or enter the workforce), and so the economic and personal results of their education has not yet manifested in their full way.

This does not mean interviews are invalid, or that the things people say about their experiences are always necessarily misleading, or that people do not adequately understand their own situations. The discussion of hegemony within a critical cultural studies framework recognizes that ideology can only succeed in so far as there is a real meaning to hook onto: it is not that people are under false illusions, rather that the categories we use to understand are themselves incomplete, necessarily obscuring the whole reality of the situation.¹⁴² Still, often the most perceptive analyses offered by students – as is the case with Willis’ ‘lads’ and their intuitive understandings of the pitfalls of individualism and meritocracy – can lead to self-destructing results. Despite the lads’ accurate social analysis and understandings of the consequences of the class society (not articulated consciously but embedded in their practices and attitudes), they still were not able to escape the established working-class trajectory laid out for them. In fact, the haunting irony and lasting importance of Willis’ work is that he showed it

¹⁴¹ Hall, Stuart, “Interview with Stuart Hall,” in *Critical Dialogues*, 1996, pg.402

¹⁴² See Hall, “The problem of ideology,” in *Critical Dialogues*, 1996

was precisely the depth of their understanding that landed them firmly on the subordinated path.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter will address the study’s guiding research questions – namely, how do community colleges facilitate reproduction and mobility through their institutional workings; what narrative is created around this; and how students experience their education at the community college. The findings are organized around three primary “contradictions” which emerged from the data: the organization of the institution and student body around vocational (“workforce development”) versus academic (“liberal arts” or “transfer”) tracks; the students perceived “transformation” into intellectual, college-going subjects amidst a climate of stigma on the community college; and political activism and progressivism in the increasingly corporatized learning space of the community college classroom. Additionally, five case studies are used to illustrate how these contradictions manifest in the students’ experience. Biographies of the five case studies are offered. Brief biographies of all interviewees are included in the appendix. I will start with a brief discussion of each contradiction.

A. Contradiction 1: Vocational versus academic tracks

The three community colleges in this sample are split and organized around two halves: vocational education, termed “workforce development” and liberal arts/academic education, termed the “transfer track.” This split can be seen in every aspect of operation of the community college, even down to the campus map and where buildings are placed. Workforce development students are intending to go straight into a job after community college, sometimes completing an Associates of Arts degree or sometimes completing only a certificate. Workforce development fields include subjects such as allied health, job retraining and job skills programs for dislocated workers, and what is termed “industry programs” (these are programs in development with specific industry partners, such as the MGM Casino-STCC partnership). Program offerings are usually tailored to regional labor economics, and so the community colleges in this study offer programs in a variety of healthcare-related fields, paralegal training, machinist training, and a broad umbrella of ‘business’ degrees, which are intended as preparation for entry-level work for the Western Mass health insurance industry. Transfer-track students, on the other hand, are intending to obtain a baccalaureate degree at a four-year institution. They

complete an Associate of Arts or Associate of Science degree by taking classes in a broad array of subject areas (this is intended to parallel freshmen and sophomore students who take general education at four-year schools). Although the overwhelming majority of incoming community college students, when surveyed, say they intend to transfer, only about one-fourth actually do so.¹⁴³

The reason to deal with this as the first ‘contradiction’ is because it structures the community college at a very basic operational level, and filters up into all relationships between students, faculty and administration (these relationships will almost exclusively be built within either workforce development or transfer tracks, effectively segregating these two populations from each other). Each community college in my sample was consistent in repeating the message that they offered both options, in equal capacity. This can be seen even down to the class catalogue, alumni catalogues and advertisements, where anywhere there is a mention of one track, the other is paired right beside it (see appendix). The resounding line is, ‘the community college can serve your needs, whatever your goals are.’ However, despite that, there are contested claims around the status of workforce development at the community college: many institutions, in an effort to attract the middle-class students increasingly being priced out of four-years, are trying to distance themselves from a too-vocationalized image. At one HCC Board of Trustee meeting, a faculty member teaching in allied health invoked this divide between the vocational and academic sides of the community college:

“...We are supposed to be offering what students need and come here for. it seems that whenever workforce development is brought up, it [workforce development] gets placed as a lower priority.”¹⁴⁴

Student demand for workforce development studies has continually increased since the 1960’s. Although a majority of students indicate that they want to go into a liberal arts program, about 80 percent of community college students are currently in vocational programs.¹⁴⁵

Paul Willis wrote extensively about this divide between vocational (“manual”) and liberal arts (“mental”) education, which feeds into different types of labor. A fundamental difference is that in the 1970’s, Willis was writing directly about a highly-gendered, mechanical, physical

¹⁴³ American Association of Community Colleges, 2013 data. This is a generous estimate. Some estimates are that actual transfers are as low as 12% of the students intending to do so, while more recent 2016 data from the CCRC holds that a full 14% transfer.

¹⁴⁴ HCC BOT meeting notes: October 2014

¹⁴⁵ Pincus 1994, quoted in Herideen 1998; pg. 31

industrial labor force – such as men in factories. Today, the overwhelming majority of vocational labor being prepared is for the service industries, comprised largely of women, yet the philosophical underpinnings of Willis’ argument still hold up, and this is largely due to the nature of service work – deskilled, centralized and still rationalized, just as in a factory:

For the wage earning working class, objective differences produced by the distillation upwards of control and planning produce little internal division for themselves. The actual experience of work for most blue collar people is very similar. With de-skilling, centralization and rationalization there is really only a marginal difference between working at one machine in the tool room, and working at the same machine on the production line. The commonality of experience persists even through the proliferation of differentiated conditions of work. . .¹⁴⁶

It is important to note that the mental/manual divide is not a division based in reality. That is, all forms of ‘mental’ labor require manual work; and vice versa, manual work requires a great deal of mental labor. However, this division has been used to justify class divisions on two levels: a division within the working class so that, according to Willis, “those doing the same basic kinds of work believe themselves to be socially diverse,”¹⁴⁷ and divisions between different class groups based on an illusion that they are where they are due to differences in competence, which serves to further legitimate and maintain class differences. Willis writes:

For the working class, the objective differences they face are much less important than the ideological resonances they bear. These resonances concern, at least in part, an articulation of sexism upon the mental/manual division. The form of the mental/manual division as it returns to production is therefore profoundly different from the material base which supports its interpretation . . . Just because capitalism needs and can benefit from ideological distortions and divisions of this kind does not mean that it will be supplied with them.¹⁴⁸

The workforce development/transfer tracks are a derivative of this mental/manual division, and is proving to be a highly contested terrain in the community college setting. In the profiles of the community colleges at the beginning of this paper, it was discussed how community colleges, as politically and economically vulnerable and malleable institutions, are increasingly being shaped to the needs of corporate employers looking to externalize the cost of training. While this arguably meets the overwhelming student demand for vocational education, critical theorists argue against this trend of the vocationalization of the community college, saying it does not expand the true democratic mission of education:

The critics of the community college-business alliance provide a counter-discourse against the corporate domination of schools. They argue that real education is lost when schools become

¹⁴⁶ Willis 1977, 157

¹⁴⁷ Willis 1977, 157

¹⁴⁸ Willis 1977, 157

overly vocational. . . Critics of this model point out that skill-based education satisfies the short-term interests of business, but falls short of the traditional goals of higher education. Technical training does not provide the education necessary for citizenship or even for long-run upward social mobility.¹⁴⁹

In this viewpoint, vocational training is not considered to be true education while “the potential of the students is sacrificed to the relatively narrow needs of an industry.”¹⁵⁰

On the other side of the coin, faculty and staff at community colleges are often supportive of workforce development and see it as being unnecessarily stigmatized. Perhaps it is because they are the ones with the most immediate experience of students, and understand that a major force driving students to enroll at a community college is a need for economic sufficiency and stability, a material reality somewhat ignored in critical educational theory. Penelope Herideen, who worked as a community college teacher, writes on this tension from her 1998 study on community college students in postindustrial America:

In my courses, students became more aware of America’s social inequalities and the socio-psychological injuries they inflict. However, these students are centered on overcoming personal hardship. Their first priority is discovering ways to better their own lives: “Which career path will yield economic returns enough to support my family?” “How do I get a job that will lead to career mobility?” These students wanted guidance to help them achieve financial stability. . . Student reactions forced me to retrace my path toward acquiring a critical consciousness and the material conditions allowing me to do so.¹⁵¹

Herideen has synthesized these differing arguments into an approach she calls “critical mainstreaming,” which is essentially an acknowledgement that the “manual/mental” divide is indeed an illusion, or a false choice, offered to students and that community colleges need to accept both roles -- recognizing the need for both economic survival within a capitalist system, as well as a broad, critically-oriented education that can build up citizens and a more democratic society. She says that “work education can bridge the gap between vocational and critical education by educating for citizenship while also providing students with the analytical and critical skills needed in the modern workplace. . . creating a critical consciousness and preparing students for economic stability and even upward mobility are compatible and even mutually supportive goals.”¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Herideen 1998: 112

¹⁵⁰ Griffith and Connor (1994:46); quoted in Herideen 1998: 112.

¹⁵¹ Herideen 1998: 117

¹⁵² Herideen 1998: 29

At the level of the practical operations of the community colleges, it can be said that the “critical mainstreaming” approach is already in effect by necessity, although in an unacknowledged way. The argument on this level is not against vocational education per se (as officials at the administrative level are working very closely with corporate partners to begin with). Vocational education also drives the majority of student demand (research suggests that the majority of community college students nationally are enrolled in workforce development)¹⁵³, but more about keeping the larger influence of workforce development behind the scenes so as to keep the community college’s image open, fluid and ever-malleable to the changes in the economy and demographics of student demand. As stated before, the tide is turning towards needing to net more of the academically prepared middle-class students who have high school diplomas, yet are opting out of the expensive path of four-years. The institutions are still careful to keep transfer track and workforce development separated, in both image and reality, reifying the artificial ‘manual/mental’ divide between workers and scholars. As Raymond Williams advocated for when he taught adult education in England, Herideen writes that “work-related education that merely trains workers for the labor force and not for critical thinking fails to develop their true potential,”¹⁵⁴ which lends a strong argument for not continuing to segregate these two functions of the community college.

B. Contradiction 2: “Transformations” into an intellectual subject and community college stigma

In my interviews, students regularly brought up the term “transformation” when asked what the effect of their community college experience has been on them so far. This became such a recurrent theme that I added a group of interview questions probing this specific point. I wondered if the term had been used regularly in media materials the three community colleges were putting out (this was the case, but who knows which came first? The HCC rebranding director had stated that the reason for this new image was “discussions with students.” See [appendix](#) for “HCC Transformation stories,” in desktop folder). In the majority of interviews, except for two, students described themselves as being “transformed” by the experience along

¹⁵³ In a case study of twenty community colleges across the nation, Van Noy found that the majority of students are pursuing workforce development programs. Van Noy, Michelle. “The outlook for noncredit workforce education,” in *New Directions for Community Colleges*, Summer 2009, Vol. 2009 Issue 146, p87-94. 8p.

¹⁵⁴ Herideen 1998: 29

the following three lines (with some variation): intellectually, and discovering that they had academic capabilities they previously did not know of; politically, in terms of being exposed to social issues as well as local campus activism that incited them in some way (even if they did not all have time to participate), but also understanding how their personal biographies were connected in urgent and crucial ways to these larger political issues; personally, in terms of improved self-confidence and a sense of self-efficacy towards not just education but “making it” in their lives.

To understand the significance of a ‘transformation’, it is necessary to understand the context among which it is taking place. Herideen found that a predominant theme amongst students was their internalization of the stigma of being a “nontraditional” community college student:

...community college students are disproportionately working class, non-white, and academically weak. They are stigmatized by the assumption that their inadequate academic preparation is due to a lack of cognitive ability. . . Terms such as *under-preparedness*, *low achievement*, lack of *basic skills*, and *cognitive skills* are frequently used to describe nontraditional community college students.¹⁵⁵

The stigma of attending, or thinking about attending, a community college is a real phenomenon and reiterated by many in my interview sample. One interviewee spoke of navigating the stereotype of the typical community college student in the work world:

Evan: ...I have a good internship-job right now, so when people see that and they also see that I came from community college, that kind of confuses them so much because they have this whole thing about community college people. And there are people that I know that came from STCC that are the typical, like, what you would think a community college is.

Interviewer: ...And what is that? Describe that kind of person to me. ...I know this is not your idea, it's just the stereotype.

Evan: A 'community college kid' is a girl or guy that kind of skated through, bare-minimum, and is kind of there just because he got lucky, and that he's not really... He's going to have a hard time adjusting.

Interviewer: ...So someone you don't have a lot of confidence in.

Evan: The first part is not true, the second part could be true, because a lot of community college kids have a harder time adjusting to a four-year college.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Herideen 1998: Pg.22

¹⁵⁶ Interview Transcript: #9S / pg.26

At an Adult Basic Education panel offered by Holyoke Community College, the purpose was meant to offer practical tips on switching from remedial to college-credit classes, but when the panel was opened up to audience questions, the discussion quickly turned to the problem of the stigma of attending a community college. Students and panelists went back and forth between rationalizing the stigma and rejecting it:

“I went to a very small high school – like, very small, maybe 400 people – and it was hard for me to tell people I was going on to a community college. But when I got here, I realized that what they don’t know is this is getting me where I want to go either way...So I don’t really need to care what they think.”

...

“My parents discouraged me from it and tried to [encourage] me to go to a four-year. But I had, like, no idea about how to go about doing that. They never done it. At least here, they help you. And here I am with others in this same situation [of remedial courses] with me and so I am just ignoring this [issue of stigma].”

...

[panelist, faculty member] “I went to six different universities! And you know what? The community college was the best of them, so really you are in the best place to start. ...And guess what? The people starting at four-years are just racking up debt!”¹⁵⁷

The encouragement offered at the panel shows the constant wrestling with this stigma that goes on within students – whether rejecting it outright or internalizing it, students have to confront the issue at some point in their community college education that they are at what is seen and perceived to be a ‘second-rate’ school, and it is perceived that this is the case because they simply were not smart enough. This stigma is rooted deep in the historical development of community colleges. In the 1950’s, when legislation was passed to encourage the development of community colleges nationally, an image campaign was underway to battle the stigma of them (perhaps directly connected to the cultural stigma around those attending, such as immigrants, as well as the stigma around vocational education as compared to existing systems of elite and private universities). A key reason around why community colleges developed liberal arts programs to begin with was to gain “legitimacy” as true places of higher education, even though the liberal arts programs never served the majority of students:

Key board members and campus officials understood clearly that the legitimacy of the colleges depended on their acceptance as institutions of higher education, which meant their offering liberal arts courses closely resembling those offered in four-year colleges and universities. . . the faculty in those years wanted the schools to resemble four-year institutions even more than the students did.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Notes from Adult Basic Education Panel, Holyoke Community College, Nov. 18, 2015

¹⁵⁸ Brint, Steven & Karabel, Jerome. 1989. *The Diverted Dream: Community Colleges and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900-1985*. Oxford University Press: New York. Pgs 149-150

Although many interviewees, when asked directly if they believed their community college education was inferior to what they could be getting at a four-year, would respond in the negative; the stigma would come out in implicit ways during other interview questions:

Interviewer: ...And what did you end up doing when you couldn't get into this class in time? Was there an advisor or faculty member to talk to?

Interviewee: ...No, the advisor's office – I mean, I walked by everyday... The shutters were always shut up! It was always dark in there! And then I had to leave quickly to get to work so I couldn't ever make it to see him. I couldn't just wait around. But that's just what you get at a community college. You can't ask too much of it.¹⁵⁹

Smaller statements pointing towards this dynamic abounded in the interview transcripts – the sense of “not asking too much” of an institution that is perceived as not able to give much educationally to begin with.¹⁶⁰ This also transfers to the student themselves, in terms of the associated stigmas of the “nontraditional” status, and their ability to see themselves as capable of navigating a four-year institution.

A detour is needed here to understand why the term ‘nontraditional’ is used in describing the community college population. There is the obvious comparison between age: the older-skewing population of a community college versus the ‘traditional’ college age of approximately 18 through 21 or 22. However, given that community college students – no matter how old they are – are still considered undergraduates, and that they represent half of all undergraduates nationally (including those at four-years), it seems a misnomer to identify the reality for half the population as ‘nontraditional.’ There is also the issue of the less linear path through the education system: in terms of getting a bachelors degree, it is more costly, time-wise, to start at a community college as it is a system that can take many years to navigate amidst the triple realities of life responsibilities, lack of infrastructural support at the institution, and lack of recognition of legitimacy of community college courses once a student does transfer. Once a student does successfully transfer to a four-year university, they face not having many courses

¹⁵⁹ Interview transcript #2B: Pg.27

¹⁶⁰ On a personal note, it was only after I transferred from a community college to a four-year that I realized that there are true differences in resources available to students. I was shocked and amazed at libraries that had any books you wanted and were open all night, working campus cafes and restaurants, and comprehensive advising and financial aid centers. Not having anything to compare it to at the time, I didn't realize how under-resourced and under-staffed my community college was, however the failing infrastructure was a source of endless laughter and jokes among me and my friends (bathrooms with no working locks and where you had to bring your own toilet paper, for example!)

that they took registering or counting towards their overall degree, adding even more time.¹⁶¹ So why hang on to this designation? Arthur Levine and Jana Nidiffer, who interviewed older community college students in the 1980's, argued that the term denoted important differences between 'traditional' versus 'nontraditional' aged students:

The adults were not immersed in the academic world in the way the younger students were; their lives were more interdependent and complicated. They had well-established lives with families, homes, friendships, and regular daily activities. The adults, with the exception of the youngest students, did not go to college with the expectation of making new friends or as a first step in leaving established relationships. Instead, upon enrolling in college they found that they no longer fit into the world in which they lived. While the world remained the same, they changed. For some, the college route took them further than they anticipated or ever wanted to go.¹⁶²

This is the dynamic that the term "nontraditional" is trying to capture. Levine & Nidiffer speak of the unique challenges posed to nontraditional students that are distinct from traditional students: (1) a dramatic life event precipitating their enrollment in the college, (2) self-supporting in all aspects of their lives, except for the use of social safety-net institutions (3) the use of only one person to provide expert information on college (versus a host of people, as traditional-aged students have access to), and (4) breakdown of family and friend relationships as education within the community college progressed (104-110). Overall, they concluded that there is a difference worth making the designation "nontraditional" justified:

Compared with the students at the selective university, the poor adults at the community college were less sophisticated about college, had lower career aspirations, had achieved fewer successes in education, and had experienced greater disruption in their lives due to college. In short, for a poor adult, attending a community college proved to be more difficult and jarring than enrolling in a highly selective university at a traditional college age.¹⁶³

Remedial education is another source of stigma at the community college. The issue of remediation was consistently brought up, among almost every single interviewee in my sample: almost all students get placed into one or more remedial courses, most typically math. Remedial courses were discussed as one of the biggest obstacles not just for completing the required credits for the degree, but also to their mental image of themselves as students. For undocumented students, the issue of remediation becomes particularly harrowing, because not

¹⁶¹ Dougherty (1994: pgs.84-93) actually identified three challenges when a CC student finally does transfer: culture shock, lack of financial support, and lack of accreditation of coursework already taken. He showed that courses taken at a CC are looked upon by four-years with suspicion, and students are often asked to provide syllabi for the course (sometimes an impossible task if the course was taken a year or two back) or take courses again.

¹⁶² Levine, Arthur, and Nidiffer, Jana. 1996. *Beating the odds: how the poor get to college*. Jossey-Bass: California, pg. 108

¹⁶³ Levine & Nidiffer, 1996: Pg. 110

only are they paying almost triple in tuition rates for each class, but taking remedial credits does not count towards making you a full time student (and this is key to qualifying for DACA relief). Not only are students who need remediation considered a “drain on resources,”¹⁶⁴ by the administration, but they are told through a simple and somewhat arbitrary college-entrance examination that they are not yet college-material and designated as “underperforming.” Often students get stuck in these non-credit gateway courses, having to repeat them several times (and pay the same tuition as a for-credit class), and it is in remedial education where many community college students drop out.¹⁶⁵ Penelope Herideen writes of the intertwining of stigma, remedial education, and the resulting effect on students:

Lack of self-esteem is a major issue for these students. Typically, returning to school is a hope taken with a deep breath. Self-doubts often surface as students recall negative past educational experiences. Evan Dobelle, chancellor at San Francisco City College, noted that “the biggest problem we have at this institution is self-esteem, not cognitive ability. . . . Most proposals are aimed at short-term cost efficiency and conceived from within a false image of nontraditional students’ abilities and motivations. Traditional students are considered less costly and a safer investment because transfer education is considerably less expensive than remedial or occupational programs.”¹⁶⁶

As she further writes, “they see hope in education, yet it is a hesitant hope.”¹⁶⁷ Amidst this “hesitant hope” and climate of stigma is the task of taking up the subjectivity of a college-going student, or someone engaged in the intellectual side of life. In the interviews, students discussed a sense that part of this transforming into an ‘intellectual subject’ was bittersweet, as it meant leaving behind those families and friends who did not understand, support, or even felt threatened by their entrance into the education system and their change. Sometimes this could have ill-intended effects, including the devaluing of previous relationships and connections that are deemed ‘not educated.’ Herideen writes:

...the community college experience, whether positive or negative, strongly impacts the lives of nontraditional students. Students reevaluate their lives because of the influence of the academic environment. When the “cultural disarticulation” between school and home culture is great, students begin to see other possible ways of life and being. For example, one re-entry woman...stated: “I thought my life was normal before I came to college. I thought everyone was

¹⁶⁴ HCC BOT transcript, Pres. Bill Messner (see citation in beginning of paper).

¹⁶⁵ Though outside the scope of this paper, there is a larger and bitter debate around remedial education, as many education policy makers looking into attrition at community colleges recognize that these courses act as a barrier, yet one of the traditional purposes of the community college is to remediate students. (See Dougherty 1994; or the 2013 report from The Century Foundation Task Force on Preventing Community Colleges from Becoming Separate and Unequal, “Bridging the Higher Education Divide: Strengthening Community Colleges and Restoring the American Dream.”)

¹⁶⁶ Herideen 1998: 11

¹⁶⁷ Herideen 1998: 55

like me and my family. When I went to the college, I found out that I was wrong. I can learn new words and have better friends.”¹⁶⁸

This new subjectivity was discussed even by students going into vocational programs. A majority of this sample was termed ‘first-generation’ college student, or the first in their family to go to college, so the world of education – even if hoped for by family members – was still foreign and mysterious. Herideen writes in a lucid way on this dynamic within her study:

Most returning students are not accustomed to mainstream academic culture. They do not know what to expect or what is expected of them. When they look back on their past educational experiences, they do not find comfort or strength. These students were not usually “college tracked” in high school. Their parents did not attend college. The pursuit of education was not part of their home culture. They feel uneasy, as one would feel being in a foreign country where the customs and rituals differ from what has been learned and experienced. They come not knowing the cultural norms of academic culture – the language, codes and modes of conduct, interpersonal relations or mannerisms of middle-class intellectuals, and the bureaucracy as well as the concept of political correctness and the importance of the informal network.¹⁶⁹

Interviewees in this study expressed a similar sense of “uneasiness,” albeit in different ways. This was coupled with a sense of being “the one who made it in my family,” or, “it is miraculous I am here.”¹⁷⁰ This is a complex dynamic – the idea of the ‘exception proves the rule’ holds here, as the few who make it become the symbols that we truly live in a meritocratic and equal society, and that class differences really just boil down to individual competence, talent and hard work. Rivera, in her study on elite firms and how they hire, found that sometimes job applicants’ backgrounds did not affect whether they were hired or not and a few from different social backgrounds indeed made it. She writes:

Some might interpret such cases as evidence that the playing field for elite jobs is level. But in systems of class inequality and elite reproduction, the deck is stacked, not automated. Even in very rigid class societies, there typically are small amounts of movement between ranks; a complete lack of mobility threatens the legitimacy and stability of existing power structures.¹⁷¹

The irony is that this type of unpredictability and creativity of the social structure, this seeming opening within the system, actually works to reinforce and strengthen it (the same dynamic seen with the Willis lads). Bell Hooks writes that “the reality is there are no closed

¹⁶⁸ Herideen 1998: 30

¹⁶⁹ Herideen 1998, pg.61

¹⁷⁰ Transcript #8M/Pg.5; Transcript #8M/Pg.29

¹⁷¹ Rivera 2015: 253

systems, that every system has a gap and in that space is a place of possibility.”¹⁷² This “place of possibility” is essentially the place where inequality is interrupted or reproduced.

As stated above, despite an overall context of stigma, interviewees spoke of being at the community college as “transformative” along three main lines: intellectually, in terms of overcoming the sense of “unease” in the classroom and learning the ropes of college; politically, in terms of learning how their own personal biographies were connected to larger social and political structures; and personally, in terms of the community college “healing” them and their relationship to education and the larger world. The three institutions as well use this term to speak to students about the community college as being able to offer “progression” and “movement” in their lives [see appendix, “transformation stories”]: In fact, Holyoke Community College had started a new branding campaign one year before the start of this study. The campaign centered around a set of student stories with vivid photography, and each story spoke of the potential of the community college to change their lives, their outcomes, their pathways, and even their inner selves. The idea of an education being transformative, whether being used by the community college itself or by students, can be interpreted as a clever marketing tool, but also as a radical idea. It is not putting the focus of education on achieving certain benchmarks or credentials, on competing in ranks and hierarchies, or on meritocratic qualities (all elements of social reproduction); but instead this narrative puts the purpose of education about personal, political, intellectual, and social growth.¹⁷³

C. Contradiction 3: Political activism and progressivism in corporatized learning spaces

So far, this paper has listed many ways the community college setting can contribute to the reproduction of inequality among working-class people: it’s economic and political vulnerability to being shaped by corporate forces; its supposed “academically weak” population comprised of mostly working class and students of color who were left out of more prestigious educational options and segregated to this perceived second-tier of the higher education system, where actual B.A attainment levels remain low; its maintenance of the vocational-versus-academic divide; as well as the deep and widespread stigma around its efficacy and competence

¹⁷² Hooks, Bell. 2003. *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. Routledge: New York. Pg. 23

¹⁷³ Compare this to UMass Amherst materials, which focus on rankings of UMass within the nation, economic contribution to the region, etc...[SEE APPENDIX]

as a place of higher education, which students internalize in profound ways. However, the weaknesses and challenges of the community college are the same dynamics which also make it potentially the most socially democratic and politically progressive place in the higher education system.

In *Education Still Under Siege*, Henry Giroux and Stanley Aronowitz argue that schools, from primary all the way through public higher education, now function like large corporate organizations or businesses under capitalism. They are efficient and rationalized in all possible aspects -- and this, they argue, is inherently opposed to democracy, as any kinds of critical curriculums or pedagogies are seen as challenging and therefore silenced (this includes also the silencing of teachers and swift punishment of any kind of union activity). In their book, they call on critical educational scholars to do the work of figuring out how this is affecting students.¹⁷⁴ This thesis has, in some sense, attempted to do so on a small scale: the effect is to create students who have no choice but to be politically engaged on some level, even if it is only in their thinking. While community colleges are certainly not outside of the pervasive net and rationalizing influences of capitalism and private capital, students and teachers have managed to build a space within the institution that can analyze even its own subsumption into capitalism. This is largely happening through student activism on campus that is incited by class work engaged with social and political issues.

Traditionally, universities are seen as places of progressivism and left-leaning students who engage in vigorous political campaigns: from the time of the 60's and 70's to today (although it is lessening to fewer of the student populations today), universities have been spaces enabling critical thought about the destructive effects of war and militarism, economic inequality, environmentalism, and civil rights. Herideen puts it best when she says, "schools are vital public spheres where individuals have the possibility of developing a sense of community,"¹⁷⁵ and therefore learning to act together politically. In the 60's and 70's, community colleges were being directly shaped by business forces (as they are, even more so, today), so perhaps they got an earlier taste of the neoliberal character that is now sweeping across universities. In addition, community college students are notoriously time-strapped, as the majority of the population works full-time (as denoted by part-time enrollment levels, which

¹⁷⁴ Aronowitz, Stanley, and Giroux, Henry. 1993. *Education Still Under Siege*. Bergin & Garvey: Connecticut.

¹⁷⁵ Herideen 1998: 29

is higher at all community colleges in this sample) and many students balance this with child and family care.¹⁷⁶ Despite this, political activism on the three campuses included in this study was quite high. All students were engaged on some level with the political life of their campus. At the time that this study was being conducted, HCC in particular was the site of many DREAMer movement actions, led by the campuses undocumented student population and supported by a wide coalition of students and faculty (these actions even led to the footsteps of UMass). However, students spoke of this activism having to take place in between cracks and spaces of time, and without any infrastructural support (either their own or through the campus).

There were students as well who, though they did not directly participate in campus activities, spoke of the effect of being in such a diverse space as the community college on their perceptions of difference and diversity, as well as the effects of being with others from similar backgrounds to them. Although the diversity of this setting doesn't make for a perfect social utopia when it comes to matters of difference – racially, economically, and otherwise – there was a language consistently employed among interviewees when asked whether they felt their community college was diverse, and what they think the effect has been on them to be in such an environment:

Interviewer: ...and what do you think the benefit is to being in a [diverse] environment such as this?

B: It gives people a chance to think beyond what their own circle of experiences provides them, and particularly in a community like HCC, where it's so diverse -- it's not just diverse culturally or ethnically, but it's also diverse in a range of life experiences. I mean, I come to it from being a nontraditional student; also gay. But there's a segment where those who've experienced racial discrimination, or students who maybe came from a much more affluent background, but their parent says, "I want you to attend community college before I'm willing to pay for a four-year college," for that experience. So it's an opportunity for students to learn through the experiences of other students. I think that's really important because, if you just go into the world with your own knowledge, you are missing out on the ability to appreciate what somebody else brings to the table.¹⁷⁷

It is another measure of growth outside the social reproduction debate that the community college setting, though not directly encouraging political activism, fosters a climate in which students feel the necessity to act. This necessity comes partly from their own backgrounds, and

¹⁷⁶ See Herideen 1998; Dougherty 1994; Levine & Nidiffer 1996 for writings on community college students and lack of time as a major structuring force in their educational trajectories. For example, one reason why the “two-year” degree often takes four to six years is that students attend part-time while balancing other responsibilities.

¹⁷⁷ Transcript #6J/Pg.33

mixed with the opportunity to learn of social issues in the larger world that implicates their lives, can precipitate the awakening that leads to activism. The political philosopher Hannah Arendt states, “Unless individuals already have had the experience of confronting each other as equals and share a sense of what public freedom means, they will not be able to act together.” Perhaps, in defiance of all stigma and stereotypes, the challenges of the community college context enables a sort of “public freedom” for students from different social worlds to come together and act.

D. Community College Students Interviewed: Five student case studies

What follows is the biography of five students. These were selected out of the 21 interviews for the fact that they each represented a different life situation and social position within the interviews, and give a good sense of the range of experiences contained within the whole interview set. Although each interview was unique and told a very different story not only of the student but of the community college (through the lens of the student’s perspective), detailing each one would make the thesis too long. Instead, my aim is to focus on what makes the interviews come together, or what are the similarities in experiences between them. Each of the 21 interviews falls into one of these five broad categories: (1) undocumented students, (2) Ivy transfer, (3) vocational, (4) working parent, (5) UMass transfer. I selected one biography from each category to detail here. Shorter descriptions of each interviewee are included in the appendix. The biographies also illustrate the ways that the three contradictions (described in the previous section) manifest in and structure aspects of their experience. Names and major identifying information have been changed.

1. Gabriela

Gabriela is a 22 year-old undocumented student from Colombia. Although she was born in Colombia, she immigrated to America with her mom and younger brother when she was 10 years old, and has attended high school and received her diploma in the Hampshire county area. She is currently studying at HCC, and is on the transfer track: she is attempting to complete a two-year associate of liberal arts degree to transfer to one of the local private colleges such as Smith or Mount Holyoke specifically because, as private colleges, they can both accept and also

offer financial aid to undocumented students. (UMass is one of the few campuses that won't accept or offer aid to undocumented students). At HCC, she serves on the Latino/a Students Association. Through her involvement in this group, she has been able to lead marches both at HCC and the UMass campus to call attention to undocumented students and their invisibility on campus.

Although Gabriela is now on the transfer track, and hoping to study at a four-year university and receive her B.A., she began in the community college with a different goal in mind – to study business at UMass Amherst. When asked why she switched, she explained that her undocumented status presented challenges at the community college she was not anticipating:

Gabriela: So when I started, I started as a business major, actually. I did business and I hated it, I didn't like it. [asides] And my plan was to actually transfer to UMass to do a four-year, but I didn't know that I couldn't do it... [clarifies] ...because I'm undocumented. Because UMass won't take into account the credits and they won't give you any financial aid if you are undocumented. Sometimes they won't even accept you because of it. Then after, I was talking to my friend, and he introduced me to Irma and so I changed my major to liberal arts because, in order to work with her, you have to be a liberal arts major.

Interviewer: I see, because she wants you to go on to the four-year, and those are liberal arts schools.

Gabriela: And then I realized that those [elite private] schools do give you financial aid. They give you a lot of [private grants], money to help.

Interviewer: So when you started that first semester at HCC, you didn't know that UMass had this [admissions policy], so your hope was to go there, and how did you find out? What was that moment like?

Gabriela: So, my friend is also undocumented, the one who introduced me to the Pathways program, and he told me that he went through the same thing his first year because he's a year older than me. He went through the same thing as me and he thought that he was going to do business, and then he realized he couldn't go to UMass, so the same thing happened to him. So then he told me, "You know, you can't go to UMass."

Irma is an academic counselor within a federally-funded program at HCC called "Pathways." Pathways is set up specifically to help nontraditional students (older, returning students such as dislocated workers; veterans; students with disabilities; and now undocumented students) who are excelling at the community college to get into selective liberal arts colleges, such as Smith, Mount Holyoke, or Amherst College. They offer academic advising, help with financial aid, and assistance with networking and college events. In order to be in the Pathways

program, a student must declare a liberal arts concentration – i.e., they must get themselves out of workforce development and onto the transfer track. Irma was a central driving force in Gabriela's college trajectory, and was one of the only counselors at the community college who was willing to research the specific issues that the undocumented students were facing. Both Gabriela and her friend (also interviewed) found that there was no knowledge of what an undocumented student should do at any level of the community college: registrars didn't know how they should register, financial aid counselors didn't know any grants or scholarships they could apply for, and advisors didn't know what colleges they could even apply for. As a result, a small group of undocumented students informally worked together on campus to pass along information about how to get through the community college's bureaucracy:

Interviewer: Are there things that HCC doesn't provide that are important to you, or that you wish that they provided? I'm guessing the one thing would be tuition assistance?

Gabriela: Yeah. I would say, like, having more information for [undocumented] students like me. ...Because I didn't know that I was going to be an "international" student. They treat you as an "international" student, even though I have been here for a long time. And the tuition rates for international students are a lot higher than for in-state students.

Interviewer: So you pay international student tuition, at triple the rate?

Gabriela: I was, for a year, but since I got my social security...

Interviewer: ...But there wasn't any dedicated counselor to help undocumented students, or anyone to really turn to? You had to get information from [your friend] essentially?

Gabriela: Actually, when I first applied, I told them that I didn't have a social security number, and I told them that I didn't have anything and it took them a long time to figure out what I had to do. And other people don't say it, they just put a number and it doesn't matter, so they're still paying in-state tuition. So I could have done that, but I didn't know about it. The rest, I learned from [my friend].

The advantages of the community college that other interviewees spoke of who had U.S. citizenship – the lower tuition cost, the flexibility, support programs and grants – were largely not available to the undocumented students, and the resources that did exist were the most exceptional and in their barest form. For example, the Pathways program, which does not cater specifically to the needs of undocumented students and, in fact, due to their operation on federal funding, is not allowed to include in their formal purpose statement that they counsel undocumented students. Irma, the counselor, was researching the information as she went

along.¹⁷⁸

Penelope Herideen in her 1998 study of community college students' realities in post-industrial America writes that community college students are one of the most "time-strapped" in the country:

The most difficult burden for community college students is the lack of time. Both male and female students have multiple responsibilities, only one of which is attending college. Although schooling is extremely important to them because they hope it will lead to a more secure economic future, almost all work either full or part-time. . . . Community college students are [Juliet Schor's] "over-worked" Americans. . . . "I have to keep running as hard as I can to stay in the same place," one student notes.¹⁷⁹

While all students interviewed carried out incredibly busy daily schedules, the undocumented students, including Gabriela, also had to get through particularly grueling days to accommodate their education, supporting their basic needs, and paying triple the tuition rates with no available federal aid or other assistance. This meant working two or three jobs at a time (under the table and with no wage-level or other federal labor protections), managing public transportation, as well as keeping up with school work. Another student interviewed in this category woke up at four a.m. each morning to catch two buses – totaling over four hours a day – just to make it to his classes, saying he would do "anything to not miss classes."¹⁸⁰ Gabriela spoke of this factor in her own experience:

Interviewer: ...Describe a typical school day for me . . . Do you go to classes in the morning and stay on campus and study? Or do you come home? Do you live closer to campus? Do you commute a lot? What's a typical day?

Gabriela: So, for me, when I go to school, I get up at 6. I get to school at, like, 7. Because I only take 20 minutes to get ready! I'm lazy! [asides] ...I get ready in 20, and the bus leaves at like 6:45, so I get to HCC at like 7:30, 7:20.

Interviewer: ...And classes start at 8 usually?

Gabriela: I take classes at 9, because then I have an hour to study, and then my classes are done at like around 12:30 [pm] or 1 [pm] usually, and then I come home and I get ready to go to work, and then I work from 3 [pm] to 9 [pm], and then I come home and I study, and then I do it all over again [the next day].

Interviewer: ...Weekends?

Gabriela: And then on the weekends, I work both days.

¹⁷⁸ Discussion notes with Irma Medina of HCC Pathways. July 2015.

¹⁷⁹ Herideen 1998: 49-52

¹⁸⁰ Transcript #13B/Pg.5

Interviewer: ...And how many classes do you typically take in a semester?

Gabriela: So it's been taking me a lot longer time because I've been taking three, or two classes.

Interviewer: Is that a full-time or part-time load?

Gabriela: That's a part-time load.

Interviewer: And so that's why you're kind of spilling over the 'two years'. They say [the transfer degree] is two years but with working it's a lot harder to do that. . . Alright, so then you have that very strict schedule: morning classes, a small amount of time to get ready for work, and then study. Do you sleep, ever?

Gabriela: I do! I know I have bags right now, but...

Interviewer: But has that been a struggle, just in terms of getting studying done, getting some sleep in... that kind of thing?

Gabriela: The thing is that I have to pay for school my self, and I also have to pay for my living expenses. So work is... I just have to work. So that's why it's been a little harder for me to get the best of grades in school and to be, like, more involved in school. But, uhm, I mean... You have to do it, so... [shrugs].

Although her current work place has been supportive of her school schedule, offering flexibility during stressful times such as finals, she notes that because she is undocumented, she fears they could let her go or reduce her wages at any time – adding another level of stress to her daily schedule and planning for future semesters. Previous jobs she had worked at included harassment from kitchen staff, withholding of wages, and inflexibility around her school and bus transportation schedule. She described these experiences as so emotionally difficult that it set her back in school, eventually leading to her leaving:

Interviewer: ...Those jobs that are bad like that can take so much out of you...

Gabriela: ...That job, really... I would go home and all I wanted to do was, just, drink or cry or something; or not do anything, like schoolwork or anything. So it did take a lot. And it did also take a lot to leave that job because... It was a weird, strange relationship. ...And the thing is that job paid all of my bills. So that's what kept me from [quitting].

Undocumented students face an extra layer of vulnerability that makes the community college path particularly difficult. Because of their open-door admissions policy, community colleges are, and will continue to be, often the first and *only* access point for the nation's

estimated four- to five-million undocumented youth¹⁸¹ to enter higher education. However, the open-door admissions policy in their case has many strings attached. Paying attention to their specific difficulties and changing the institution to better accommodate them is a politically urgent task for anyone interested in expanding access to higher education. The discussions of national free community college tuition, for example, often leave out this population.¹⁸²

Gabriela is studying to become an immigration lawyer. When asked about her future aspirations and what effect HCC has had on her aspirations and sense of self, she explained that not only did her educational aspirations change, but she gained a sense of political activism around her undocumented situation:

Interviewer: . . . Is the way you see yourself now that you're studying at HCC different than the way you saw yourself when you began? Has your sense of yourself as a student changed?

Gabriela: It definitely has, because when I started at HCC, I didn't want to go to HCC or I didn't want to go to school at all. . . . But now that I'm there, I like going. And I'm paying for it myself with no help and everything, so if I would choose to not keep going, I would definitely be able to. But I like it. I like helping students, helping undocumented students. I actually want to be an immigration lawyer. Now my idea has changed [of] what I want to be here for. . . . So it has kind of given me that purpose to fight for people's rights. Not only undocumented people, but just for people in general. So I want to go on and become a lawyer, but I want to specialize in immigration law and just fight for people's rights.

Interviewer: So you feel a sense of purpose, that you know you're meant to do something in a way? So you didn't want to go to college before. When you were there that first semester, what was in your mind about being there? Were you just like, "I'm just going to try it this one semester?" Or, "I'm really just doing this for my mom." What exactly was the transition that happened? Was it finding out, "Oh wow, there's other students like me, in my situation and I can help," or, you know, can you expand on that a little bit more?

Gabriela: So my first semester, I did all business classes, and I was actually very interested in the business classes. But I still didn't feel like... I didn't put as much work into it because I just didn't feel it, I didn't want to. And then my [undocumented] friend told me all of these things that we couldn't get into – [for example,] UMass, and we couldn't do this, and we couldn't do that... That's why we did the march, because UMass is one of the only colleges around the area who does not accept undocumented students.

Although Gabriela has seemingly a long path ahead of her, she expressed Herideen's description of "hesitant hope."

¹⁸¹ "There are one million children under 18 and 4.4 million under 30 living in America out of the estimated total of 11.1 million undocumented immigrants living in America." From: Passel & Cohn, 2011 - <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/02/01/unauthorized-immigrant-population-brnational-and-state-trends-2010/>

¹⁸² For example, see the most recent bill passed in MA by Gov. Charlie Baker for a tuition waiver for students who complete their two-year transfer degree: the legislation does not pertain to undocumented students, but only legal U.S. citizens.

Interviewer: What will your life be like 15 years from now?

Gabriela: So I would say I would be... for now I would say, I would be an immigration lawyer. . . I've always wanted to travel, because I can't travel, that has been my dream. So hopefully by then, I'll be able to travel and just go around the world and learn more stuff -- that's what I want to do. So maybe I'll be an immigration lawyer, but I'll probably take a year off and just travel, and see everything. Who knows.

She has another year-worth of classes, taken at a part-time level, and is currently working with Irma to submit applications to Smith, Mount Holyoke, and Amherst Colleges.

2. Jean

Jean is a white 38 year-old student from Greenfield, studying on the transfer-track in her last semester at GCC and (at the time of the interview) about to begin her bachelor's degree at Smith College in their "Ada Comstock" program, an extension program for older female students. She is currently a single mother (her daughter is in a local high school), and spent most of her adult life working in the call center at a Western Massachusetts insurance firm, and then at Yankee Candle. Due to restructuring at Yankee Candle, she got laid off. Because one of the conditions of her unemployment was that she be in school full-time, she enrolled at GCC. Although she knew already that she wanted to go back to school, she didn't know how or what form it would take:

Interviewer: Tell me how you began your studies at GCC. What led you there?

Jean: Well, after I left my husband, which was in 2010, I had been working for a number of years in the call center at [insurance firm]. And, after about 10 years of that kind of work, I figured out that there was a lot... I knew that this was not something I was going to want to do until I retired. . . . The combination of getting frustrated at the job that I had been at for a long time, and wanting to do something more and being very interested in psychology just in general, I didn't really know what to expect... as a student... You know, three days ago it was my high school anniversary graduation, and even back then -- other than music classes -- I was a mediocre student. And my ex-husband downplayed my intelligence, a lot. I was the practical one. I felt like I needed to do something different, and I knew that I didn't want to be doing call center. So I started thinking about it, and with the encouragement of a few friends and my family, everyone thought that going into the field of psychology was a good idea . . . I decided, 'Okay, let's get our feet wet.' And I started going to GCC.

Because her unemployment was low, she was able to secure enough financial aid to completely cover her tuition costs and used loans to cover personal expenses, and attend GCC as a full-time student. She was also able to enroll in a program called "New Directions" which

helps older returning students to succeed in college. This program is comparable to HCC's "Pathways" and connected Jean with a dedicated academic advisor to assist her with four-year college applications.

At the time I had interviewed Jean, she had completed a two-year transfer degree roughly within the two year time frame and had secured admission and a full scholarship into Smith College. I asked her if she felt that her experience at GCC had changed her:

Interviewer: So is the way you see yourself now that you've finished GCC, and you've got your associates degree, different from the way you saw yourself when you began there?

Jean: ...Absolutely. . . . I had really no understanding of my level of intellectual ability. My experience taught me that I would need to go to community college because I wouldn't be able to just apply at UMass and get in. I had to go to a place that didn't have an admissions [barrier], like they took everyone. So applying at Smith -- just applying -- it never even entered my mind until the alumni director and New Directions advisor said, "You need to." And they pushed me. But I felt that I was practical, but I wasn't intellectual.

The process of understanding her intellectual abilities came through the gradual process of "proving [her]self" and getting high marks in each class. She would spend hours in tutoring centers on campus and at teachers' office hours trying to learn math, statistics, research methods, and the other requirements necessary for her Associate of Arts degree:

Interviewer: What specifically do you think led to the changes?

Jean: ...Proving myself.

Interviewer: Okay, so each class you've taken and passed, basically?

Jean: ...And being able to make the dean's list. To get statistics was a huge thing for me because you hear horror stories about Stats for Psych! ...Just the concepts. I had to work incredibly hard for Math 95, and you hear the way that Statistics for Psych was described, it sounded like calculus for high-school students! I didn't pass Algebra II in high school. So I was petrified that I'd end up having to change majors to Social Work because I wouldn't be able to pass stats. I got an A in stats, and I had to work really hard for that.

Interviewer: Did you use tutoring? Did you go to the teacher's office? ...What resources were available to you to pass it?

Jean: They had a program called "Applia" that I would spend hours on, working on the statistics. I never missed a class, ever. But the thing that amazed me about that was how much it made sense, and I was just astonished at how it made sense. Because Algebra and Geometry never made sense. ...If you get the concept. That was the hard part, was understanding how it worked, and seeing that, doing that, getting an A in stats! And being told that I had the highest final in my class! And the guy that sat next to me, Oleg, grew up somewhere in Northern Europe. And he came to class because he had to, but he didn't need the lectures. He was just one of those people that could sneeze out A's. And she told me afterward that I had the highest final -- that meant that

my final was better than Oleg's! ...It was like, "aaahhhh"! It wasn't anything to do with him, other than just, "Yeay! I got it!"

Thanks to her New Directions advisor, she was able to enroll in just the classes she needed to fit into her desired eventual major, psychology, and therefore increase her ability to gain admission to a four-year – an informal, unwritten strategy that most community college students do not have the chance or knowledge to do. Simply declaring an Associate of Arts degree will not guarantee that you have the right requirements to transfer into an eventual major at the four-year school, adding on even more cost and time to complete a degree – a recognized and widespread problem for community college transfer students which leads to widespread attrition once the four-year level is reached (and perhaps contributes to the statistics that only 14% of community college transfer students end up transferring on and receiving their bachelor's degree within six years).¹⁸³

Jean was also able to participate in many of the academic clubs offered on campus, and her grades were high enough to get her into the two-year honor society for community colleges. A typical day for Jean was spent on campus starting with 8 a.m. courses (most community colleges start courses this early for those who work afternoon or evening shifts) and staying through to 3 or 4 pm to finish homework and stay involved with campus activities, while her evenings would be spent with her daughter.

When asked what challenges Jean faced with her personal identity in the classroom, Jean focused on the experience of being older or nontraditional aged in the classroom:

Interviewer: ...The thing that is really unique about community colleges is that they are really explicit about, no matter what the student's background is, they accept you. There is an open admissions policy. And actually, what you find with community colleges is they're much more diverse than four-year colleges. Did you find that to be the case?

Jean: ...absolutely.

Interviewer: So I wanted to delve into what it was like being in a diverse environment like that for you. First of all, and I know its multifaceted, but in what ways do you identify yourself, in terms of identity? ...Did you feel a certain aspect of your identity come out or else, like, some identity put on you?

Jean: Nontraditional.

Interviewer: So, in terms of your age?

¹⁸³ See Dougherty 1994 on transfer attrition factors; see CCRC 2016 report by Jenkins and Fink

Jean: Oh, the age. Definitely.

Interviewer: And what did it mean to you to be a nontraditional student in the community college setting?

Jean: Like with other students?

Interviewer: With other students, with teachers, on the campus. What did it mean for you to walk on to campus... Or was it something that receded into the background after a while? What happened with that?

Jean: Well, I definitely felt the need to prove myself and to... I mean, my relationships with my professors -- many of them are my peers. So that was a little different [rolls eyes].

Interviewer: Was it something like, "Oh, thank god that I can relate to the professors." Or was it like, "Wait, we're the same age! Why are you up there?" What was that relationship like for you?

Jean: The one that was really awkward was [department head and faculty of Psychology], because she puts out this vibe... She's 43 and I'm 38, so we're right in that same generation. And her kids are younger than my daughter. She has elementary-age children. But, for like two semesters, I didn't know what to call her because she puts off the vibe of "I am Dr. [name]," but she never said that. And in my head, she was "[first name]." And one of my friends, B., who had never had her for a class before but we were in the honors colloquium together... We had a meeting for the honors colloquium at the end of the fall semester, and I was talking to B. about, 'I don't know what to call her' but I had a year of classes with her, how could I ask her after [one year]! How am I supposed to ask this? So B. asked the question for me. . . But, for the most part, the younger students -- I was sort of a... Almost a... I was absolutely accepted, but I was sort of a maternal figure in the class. But there were a lot of non-traditional students.

Interviewer: So you weren't the only one?

Jean: ...I was not the only one.

Interviewer: But you did feel that dynamic a bit, being put in the maternal role and maybe giving advice and guidance to the younger ones?

Jean: Yes, that absolutely happened, and I fully expect when I get to Smith, when there are 150 Ada's out of 3500... Yeah, I think it will be different. But it will be okay.

Jean had started out in a certain direction in her life, but thanks to the community college, was able to change directions educationally and get on a track that can help her to raise her earnings in the future. In her case, the community college is an example of the clear interruption of social reproduction, although this comes with a certain amount of uncertainty, as she first will need to navigate the transfer process through her four-year institution. It also shows that in certain cases like this, the institution works insofar as the individual has enough personal resources to make it work to their advantage.

3. Evan

The majority of my sample had students who were enrolled in vocational programs: these are students who are not intending (at this time) to pursue further education beyond the community college degree or certification. This matches national data that shows that a majority of students attending community college are enrolled in vocational programs. Evan is a 24 year-old white male who graduated from Springfield Technical Community College with a degree in Business Administration/Accounting, and now works as an accountant at a Springfield insurance company. He attended STCC full time, and graduated with his degree in two years. Due to adequate preparation in high school, he avoided having to take any remedial courses, which helped him complete his degree on time. He had access to federal Pell grants to cover his course tuition, and worked as a food delivery driver to cover extra expenses while living with his parents. He is the first in his family to attend college, and both his parents work in professional trades (licensed practical nursing and electrical mechanic).

Before starting at STCC, Evan had tried a year at the private four-year university Salem State, and had a perspective on the comparison between the two institutions. He said that he had dropped out of Salem State due to the fact that, “for the price, you aren’t getting more than you can get a community college,” and he wasn’t sure what he wanted to do academically. I asked him whether he thought the education he got in one year at Salem State was comparable to the community college:

Interviewer: ...After going to Salem State for a year, and then going to the CC, were there marked differences in terms of just the whole environment? Were the teachers and classes and students markedly different at the CC than Salem State?

Evan: At Salem State, the teachers cared -- I think a lot. But I had smaller kinds of classes for some of them. One was a big lecture hall, but most of them are on the smaller side, so we can have interactions with teachers. But it was different from STCC because I think the mindset of professors is different because it's kind of like you're a busier person. For STCC, the professors have different... They work in the private sector, so they're not just wholly immersed in academia because they don't live in the bubble. So I think it's different

Interviewer: So it's interesting because now you can compare the two experiences -- we'll get to that a little bit, but I want you to think about STCC specifically -- what stands out for you in your education at STCC?

Evan: Well, I encountered a lot of professors that they would go out of their way to make sure that you succeeded in their class. They would not say, "Buy this \$100 book and never use it." They never did that, and they would always emphasize to go on Amazon, to rent your books.

Interviewer: So they kind of supported you and where you were at?

Evan: They supported you because they knew that everyone here was here for a different reason and that once you're done with this class, you have to go to maybe a 40-hour-a-week job, or maybe you have kids at home or something -- that everyone's story is different, and you can't expect that they're going to have many hours a week to study. So you've got to give them leeway, especially because the graduation rate at STCC is not high -- it's about 20%... It might be lower. ...I may be wrong, but that's the last word that I heard about that.¹⁸⁴

While Salem State provided support, small classes and individualized attention (all things that liberal arts college advertise as strengths of their institution), the community college ultimately had the flexibility to accommodate the many “different reasons” that people pursue education – namely, vocational as well as liberal arts. When he started at the community college, he began in a liberal arts transfer track, but quickly switched to accounting when he realized he wanted a quicker economic payoff. He also spoke of the drawbacks of the community college, specifically for his realizing his goals of entering the workforce and the lack of imparting soft skills needed for navigating the workplace, such as networking:

Interviewer: Are there things that STCC didn't provide that were important to you? Things that you would have liked to learn that you couldn't learn there? Things that you wished they had?

Evan: They didn't provide guidance on what you would really need. They only provided half the puzzle. They didn't provide the, "You got to go out there and you gotta meet people."

Interviewer: ...for your business aspirations, they didn't provide that information?

Evan: I will say something right now -- it's probably the biggest disadvantage that community colleges have -- the Massachusetts Community College system does not prepare people for a career in a large organization.¹⁸⁵

Even though Evan was entering the workforce and choose to pursue a terminal degree, he still talked about the importance of college and lifelong education:

Interviewer: One of the central principles of a community college is their open-access admission policy. So basically, anyone can go if they've met certain basic requirements. And even if they haven't, the community college will help you meet those requirements. Now, the thing that I'm coming across in my research is that some people say that that makes it too easy for people to go to college. So as a result, you get lots of students who don't really want to be there [at the community college] and aren't serious about their studies. And other people say, "Okay, well lots of students have to struggle to make it to school at all. Four-years are amazingly expensive now and if we want to create a more equal society, we need to find a way to make college open and

¹⁸⁴ Interview #9/Sn: Pg.12

¹⁸⁵ Interview #9/Sn: Pg. 28

affordable as possible." So I wanted to ask about your thinking on this issue -- should anyone who wants to be able to go to college be able to?

Evan: I think, before you go to college, you should ask yourself, "Why am I going to college?" and then...

Interviewer: ...If the person has gotten to that point where they've asked themselves those questions, and they know they want to go.

Evan: If they say, "Yes, I want to go to college," do you want to go to college for a job? Or do you want to go to college because you want to learn? If you want to go to college because you just want a job, that's great. But down the line, you're going to feel unfulfilled and you're going to feel like you have a bunch of debt for no good reason. If you want to go there to learn, you will come out regardless of those two things, feeling better. And if you have an earnest desire to learn, you will find a job.

Interviewer: ...What does learning then, and education, mean in your own life?

Evan: Education means continual improvement because there is no end to education. There may be an end to university or college, or whatever you're doing -- but there is no end to, especially technology. Technology is always improving. It will always improve, unless you go into some collapse in a dark age and the apocalypse happens. There is always going to be a need for improvement, because technology two years ago is completely different from today's.¹⁸⁶ [pg.29]

Evan, like Jean, was able to take advantage of personal resources to make the community college's flexibility and structure work for him, even while recognizing its limitations (even for his goal of entering the workforce at a mid-skill level). The fact that he was able to enter the workforce instead of transfer, as well as his adequate high school preparation, meant that he avoided two pitfalls that commonly ensnare community college students: the pitfalls of transferring, as well as remedial education.¹⁸⁷ When asked to sum up his experience of the community college, he described it as a "trade-off":

Interviewer: Is there anything about your experience or in closing you would like to say about STCC?

Evan: In community college, you have to understand you're making a trade-off. You're making a price trade-off for some benefits that you might have to work harder at down the line. That's the purpose of community college, it's to get into the higher education system at a bargain. But obviously, you're not going to have as many advantages as a person that is going to a four-year school like UMass or Westfield State, or any four-year college. But that doesn't mean that everything is lost for you. You can make up that time, and you can look at your wallet, and it can be full instead of empty because of student debt. Instead of coming out with \$60,000 in loans, you could come out with \$28.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Interview Transcript #9Sn, pg. 29

¹⁸⁷ Dougherty 1994

¹⁸⁸ Interview Transcript #9Sn, pg. 31

This is a trade-off that is becoming a particularly powerful incentive for many middle-class students amidst the national dialogue around student debt. Many traditional-aged college-going students who are academically prepared to go to four-year schools are now turning to community colleges for the first two years of their general education, and community colleges are anxious to net these more affluent, better-performing students who do not need (supposedly) costly remedial education.

4. Salina

In this sample, five students were working, single parents: four female, one male; ranging in age from 19 to 52. Salina's story represented most of the females in this category: a Puerto Rican immigrant, who raised her children first and worked in various fields, and then returned to school at a life and work impasse. Salina's family immigrated to the United States when she was in her teens. At the time of this interview, she is 52 years old and, before starting at Holyoke Community College, had worked as a medical transcriber and medical assistant since the age of eighteen. She has two teenage daughters, one with a disability, who she regularly had to switch jobs to stay home and care for. She had just completed an Associate of Arts in childhood education and was about to transfer to Westfield State College to continue with a bachelor's degree in childhood education. Her interest in this subject field was sparked by her personal experience caring for her daughter and trying to advocate for her educational needs within the public education system. She was able to finance her associate degree through a combination of federal financial aid, federal loans, and scholarships.

Before she had decided to attend HCC, she worked as a childcare coordinator at a health center, where a coworker encouraged her to go back to school. Exhaustion with not having enough time to assist her daughter, combined with inflexible work schedules and insufficient wages, were other factors in her decision to go back to school. However, her placement in remedial courses presented an obstacle to her beginning:

Salina: ...[My coworker] was a family access engagement coordinator at the Peck school, where my daughters attended, and she said, "You know what, Salina? I think you should go back." So I came here and I took the placement test, and bombed it. I haven't been in school for so many years and I bombed it, and I was so frustrated and so, like, 'I'm not going to do it. I'm not going to come.' I bombed the placement test and I went back to her and said, "You know, I bombed the placement test, I'm not going." She said, "Salina, you haven't been in school so many years. It's going to happen." So I came back late December and I said, you know what, I want to sign up for

classes. And I ended up signing [up] for 075, Math. And I started at 085 English. So I took like, really mediocre [classes], and I started.

Interviewer: ...So below-college-level, for both Math and English?

Salina: Math and English. And I took like a first-aid course, and Introduction to Nutrition, because I came as a liberal arts student. That's what they put me as and that's what I came in as.¹⁸⁹

Interviewer: So that was in 2012, when you took the placement test. [confirms] And you were initially discouraged and weren't going to do it, but it was at the encouragement of your coworker that you kind of came back?

Salina: Yeah, exactly. She said, "Salina, just don't give up." . . . I just didn't want to be in the [remedial] courses.¹⁹⁰

It took Salina three semesters – one year and a half – to complete all the necessary remedial courses to be able to begin taking college-level courses towards her associate degree. She passed each one through spending “hour after hour” at the math lab working with a tutor. For the three years, she attended HCC full-time, while holding down her health coordinator job and caring for her two daughters. This made for a long and difficult daily schedule, with constant need for coordination between her daughters’ needs, her work needs, and her school needs. When asked how she got through such a tough three years:

Interviewer: What motivated you, despite the difficulties, to keep coming everyday?

Salina: My kids. I just wanted to do something different, and them being in the school system with so much, especially in Holyoke with everything being taken over by receivership, there's somewhere down the line, I want to make some change. I want to get my degree and come back to this community and give something back.¹⁹¹

Although Salina was strapped in terms of personal resources such as money, time, or help with childcare through a partner or extended family, the community college was able to provide her with some key resources that enabled her to get through. One was the STRIVE program, a federally funded academic support program for “academically disadvantaged” students,¹⁹² that provided critical academic support for her remedial math courses. She emphatically stated that STRIVE was “majorly instrumental” in getting her not only through her remedial courses, but

¹⁸⁹ At HCC, unless a student chooses a major straight-away, he or she is enrolled as a liberal arts student – this is a generalized education transfer track.

¹⁹⁰ Interview Transcript #8M, pg.3

¹⁹¹ Interview Transcript #8M, pg.5

¹⁹² Website: <http://www.hcc.edu/student-services/support-at-hcc/strive>

getting her where she is today.

The community college did provide some critical resources to Salina, but it seemed clear in her story that it was mostly her own determination that got her through to the end of the degree despite many obstacles.

Interviewer: . . .So if you had to, how would you describe yourself as a student?

Salina: ...Motivated. I'm very concrete, I'm very... Everything has to be on time. I'm very organized. If a project is due in a week, I want to be ahead of that. I'm very organized. Everything is by calendar. And that's because of what STRIVE has installed in my head, that everything has to be organized, everything has to be scheduled. Because my classes are so... I mean, I've taken 12, 14 credits. I've never taken under that.

Interviewer: So you've always been a full-time student.

Salina: Full-time student, plus working. Not this semester we just passed, but the last semester, I did full-time here plus three jobs. So everything has to be on a time schedule. So I'm a student that's very motivated. I don't give up. I seek to not fail. So anything... If I get a bad grade on something, I'm going to work even harder to higher up my grade the next time.

Interviewer: Is the way you see yourself now that you've finished your studies different from the way you saw yourself when you first started here?

Salina: ...Yes. . . . Well, I'm very... I still have a hard time with public speaking, because I should have taken a public speaking course. But I know I can do it now. I was a student that was very shy, I didn't have many friends when I first started here. Now, walking through this hallway, there's not one person that doesn't know me. So I seek to not get people's attention, because I'm very humble, but it's not about my attention – it's what I know that I could do, that's what matters. It's not what other people see. So I'm a student that wants to succeed, not because other people want to see me succeed, [but] because I want to succeed.¹⁹³

Despite the difficulties, she maintained that it was more than worth it to return to school.

When asked how she saw herself changing again in the future, after she finished her bachelor's degree, she invoked the need to push back against community college stigma:

Interviewer: How do you see yourself changing in the future as a result of the education that you got at HCC?

Salina: Spreading the word about community colleges. That people need to realize that there is no stigma, there is nothing wrong about coming here. And it's not only this one. There's other one's out there that are pretty good. That we need to realize, it's a cheaper way – cheaper, and a much better education.¹⁹⁴

Like all students in this case study category, when asked what the most salient aspect of her

¹⁹³ Interview Transcript #8M, pg.7

¹⁹⁴ Interview Transcript #8M, pg.9

identity was in the community college context, Salina responded right away that it was her age:

Interviewer: Now, I know we have multiple aspects in our identities so I can't ask you to just pick one, obviously. But, if there was one that kind of was in the forefront of your mind while you were attending and sitting in class – was there one identity which you felt affected your education the most?

Salina: My age.

Interviewer: So quote-on-quote this idea of being 'nontraditional.'

Salina: Exactly. It feels like, when you're going to classes especially, not my educational courses, I didn't feel that way because in all my education courses, they were older for some reason. But like, my English classes, my mathematics classes, most of the students who were in there were like out of high school. So they're looking at you like, 'Why are you here?' But I felt that, even the young students are looking for advice from the older students.

Interviewer: Did you feel that there were any other important differences between you and other students? So you mentioned age. Was there anything else that would come up for you?

Salina: You know, I'm Puerto Rican; gay; I'm older; have kids. All that is here, it's all here. . . Then I became a mentor of the STRIVE program so I was mentoring other students. So there was nothing that I didn't tackle as part of diversity. I tackled every barrier of diversity, and I don't think it was a barrier for me because it didn't bother me, it didn't affect me. The only thing that really affected me is my age.¹⁹⁵

Although she hesitated to assert that this was purely negative – being or feeling older than most students – it is significant that the 'nontraditional' label has stuck on her in a way that overrides other facets of her identity. It both speaks to the changing demographics of community colleges (which traditionally use to serve older-skewing populations), as well as the fact that, at least HCC, is diverse when it comes to race and ethnicity and sexual orientation if older students can go there and not feel they are the only one in other terms of their identities. Even when it came to age, most older students stated that they knew they weren't the *only* older ones there.

Salina spoke to this:

Salina: When I walked in and saw all these young kids, I felt, 'Oh my god. I'm the oldest person in this class!' But those students didn't make me feel that way. So even those students...

Interviewer: ...You felt that way coming in, but it wasn't necessarily [them]...

Salina: ...Reflected off of them. It was off my own feelings. And once I was able to talk to those kids, those are the ones that are looking for you and say, "Hey Salina, did you do that homework assignment?" You know, those are the ones that look for advice. So it's like, "Wow, these students are the ones that... They're not that bad!" It's not that bad. I made it bad for myself because that was my reflection, but once you got into those classes, it was like totally different.

¹⁹⁵ Interview transcript #8M, Pg.9-11

Interviewer: So now, did this kind of feeling come to you at the beginning of every class, you had this fear; and then by the end of the semester, you found it changed? You got to know the students? Or, describe to me, like by the end of your time at HCC... So you just graduated?

Salina: I just graduated.

Interviewer: ...By the time you finished, did you still go in with that fear every time? So it was always in the forefront of your mind.

Salina: By the time of my fourth semester, I didn't have that feeling anymore. ...I started to trust, I started to see others like me. Older. Veterans and parents and stuff. And I'm not saying that all the teenagers were like that, because some of them were really obnoxious. You know, you got the ones that are always in the back of the class, talking and not letting everyone listen. But then there's some of them that say, "You know what? We're all here to learn. We're not here just to play around. If you're not going to pay attention, then get out the class." And it wasn't even me... I mean, I'm the one saying it in my head, but it's other teenagers that would say, "You know what? If you don't want to be in here, then get out!" As I got further in my coursework too, it totally shifted. It was more concrete students, more students that wanted to be there that were motivated and focused on what they were doing. It was those remedial courses that the students were just [apathetic].¹⁹⁶

Despite this difference in age ranges, as was the case for many in this case study category, the community college eventually became a context of incredible affection and communality through sharing the mutual struggles of managing school, work and family life:

Interviewer: What do you think will stay with you about your experiences here?

Salina: The people.

Interviewer: Describe that to me...

Salina: You go to certain places and you meet people, and you forget about them. This place, I will always want to come back and see them, because they made such an impact on my life, and such a positive impact that I will always want to come back and see how... to let them know how I'm progressing, so they can know that they were a part of that.

Interviewer: And there were people you are always going to be in touch with, and you mentioned this term, like "family."

Salina: Yeah, they're like family.

Interviewer: And these are the people like the STRIVE advisors, the mentees...

Salina: ...Yep, even the professors, other students, just in general.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Interview transcript #8M, Pg.10

¹⁹⁷ Interview transcript #8M, Pg.24

Salina spoke of the biggest impact of the community college being not just on her personal self and growth, but on her intellectually and expanding her possibilities of what she could do as a future career:

Interviewer: As a result of being here [at HCC], how do you see yourself different? How do you see the world different?

Salina: Well, I see the world in a way that there is hope. Before I was so cynical and thinking that this world... Even though I still believe that the world is a cruel place -- it's hard, life is hard, family life is hard, there's a lot of crime -- but I know that coming here has taught me that, by improving yourself, you could somehow make a difference out there. By getting yourself educated and empowering yourself, maybe one day, you can empower somebody else out there.

Interviewer: So being here kind of gave you the tools to do that?

Salina: Exactly.

Interviewer: And that's also what the hope is?

Salina: Exactly, that there *is* hope.

Interviewer: ...In your learning here, have you come across an idea that made you see things differently or think about things differently, like in a class, for example, or something that shifted... You did mention that every education class you took changed your philosophy about it, so actually if you could give me some specific [examples] and describe that.

Salina: You know, I took a lot of education courses and in every education course, there's something different that made... When I first started, I wanted to be just a preschool teacher. And mid-way through, I wanted to be an interventionist. And by the time I finished, my ultimate goal is to become an ABA specialist . . . So I think being here, my vision of the teacher I want to be has changed dramatically.¹⁹⁸

Towards the end of our interview, I asked Salina why she met with me for this interview, despite being so strapped for time. Her answer was particularly revealing of the importance of the community college -- even to students whose lives are made somewhat (hopefully temporarily) harder by the institution, and even if it is unclear in a particular case whether inequality is being reproduced or interrupted by being there:

Salina: . . . Because I want people to know! Keep talking about it until somebody listens. I think [community college] should be the first step for everyone that comes out of high school that is looking to go back to college. This should be the first step.

Interviewer: ...Not even just for people who 'failed' but for everyone?

Salina: Yes, for everyone. It shouldn't be four years for college -- you should come here, get your feet wet, get yourself situated to see what you want and what it is that you are seeking to be,

¹⁹⁸ Interview transcript #8M, Pg.25

and then work your butt off and get a transfer scholarship . . . Without education, you're nothing. There's nothing more that makes an impact in your life than educating yourself. The more educated you are, the better off in life. If you don't have education... There's a difference between you getting a job and a career, and without education, the only thing you're going to have is a job. And I always told my kids that, "Do you want a job? Or do you want a career?" Because going to college is going to make that difference, and community colleges make it possible.¹⁹⁹

Salina's case shows of the potentially revolutionary personal impact of being at the community college, despite barriers such as age and limited social safety-net resources. The fact that she was able to get through and transfer on to a four-year institution shows that tracking social reproduction at community colleges is much more complicated than charting earnings or credentials and degrees received; that there are relationships and intellectual landmarks built up in the person's life that also need to be recognized.

5. Bertrand

Bertrand is a 35 year-old white male who attended Holyoke Community College, part-time and on-and-off for 7 semesters (roughly 3.5 years worth of course work). At the time of this interview, he had just graduated with his Associate's degree in Liberal Arts with a Sociology concentration, and received admission to transfer to the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he intends to major in Political Science. He began at HCC because his husband had previously gone there and spoke continually of the "genuine love and affection he had, still has, for [HCC]."²⁰⁰ At his husband's encouragement, he began at HCC in 2012, fifteen years after he had received his high school diploma and been back in any kind of educational setting. Due to this long time gap, he placed into remedial math classes, which he approached with a sense of using them to prove himself, as "confidence boosters," for his college-level courses. He financed his education through a combination of student loans, some grants and scholarships as he maintained his grades, and waiting tables. Although he said he started at HCC hesitant and just wishing to "get a feel for it," he also knew from the beginning that if he were to go on, he would want to major in political science and so tried to gear his HCC courses towards that eventual major. One event in particular precipitated his interest in politics:

Bertrand: ...politics wasn't always my thing growing up. I grew up in a really poverty-stricken neighborhood in a suburb of Detroit, so everything was really day-to-day there. So thinking about going into politics or... I didn't feel confident enough in my own voice. So speaking up for

¹⁹⁹ Interview transcript #8M, Pg.28

²⁰⁰ Interview transcript #6J/Pg.2

other people wasn't something that I felt I could do. So it was never in my mind. My first real taste of politics was, I was living in Florida during the 2000 election. And that was an adventure to live through! . . . So it kind of woke me up...²⁰¹

After this experience, Bertrand enrolled in a Florida for-profit college, in which he took a couple distance-learning (e.g., online) courses – however, he described the experience as disastrous and did not finish the semester.

HCC turned out to be a different experience for him. I first met Bertrand at a Board of Trustee Meeting: he had been introduced to us by the president as a “rising star” and invited to tell his story of success at the community college.²⁰² Almost as soon as he started at HCC, he became involved in extra-curricular activities such as student clubs and the Student Senate. By the time I had met him, he was president of the campus-wide Student Senate and heading diverse campaigns from within the organization, such as voter registration drive, assisting with the undocumented student rallies, and greening the campus. However, he did not come into the college expecting to become a leader in this way:

Bertrand: ...[Other student senate members] wanted to pull me in and give me the confidence to take things on. About 3 or 4 weeks into the second semester, I was sitting at my office desk [in work study job], you know, and they were in another part of the student activities area. They were sitting there talking about how much they enjoy being a part of Student Senate. And they were both talking about how much it took for them to feel like they could be a part of something like that. Specifically, one of them, had just started the previous fall at HCC with an intent plan to not make any friends, keep her head down, and just take classes and move on because she didn't have any self worth. I wouldn't say I was that much into my own shell, but my plan was to just earn my credits and move on and my plan was to just transfer to UMass Amherst, just like my husband had done. And consequently, she became the president of the Student Senate in the next year. So the two of them are just talking about how much... I could tell that there was a sense of appreciation that they had had somebody tell them, "Hey, you should come join us. Try this out."²⁰³

Bertrand quickly found that, at HCC, there was encouragement, support and resources for developing a political voice. Long before his involvement with Student Senate, he found that something as simple as a course paper could turn into a larger political project that reached into the outside world.

²⁰¹ Interview transcript #6J, Pg.3

²⁰² HCC Board of Trustee meetings regularly invite exemplary transfer students that they call the monthly “rising star” to tell their story of success as evidence of the college’s larger success – of course, these exemplary cases are presented as the rule, but in fact they show the stark contrast in how the community college can work for different students with different access to personal resources. In my one year of attending HCC BOT meetings, I never saw a vocational/workforce development student invited.

²⁰³ #6J, pg. 7

Interviewer: What stands out for you in your education so far? ...What kind of things have been important to you [at HCC]? And what motivated you to keep going there?

Bertrand: The most fascinating thing, I think, is how much of education isn't in the classroom. A majority of the personal growth that I experienced at HCC was as a result of all of the involvement that I had in extra-curricular activities and attending and initiating events and projects, and also finding ways to use my education to have real-world implications. So, for example, my first semester, I took English 101, and the final paper that I wrote for that class was about the implications -- both locally as well as globally -- of the improper disposal of cellphones. . . . But after that semester was over and because of the motivation that I got from the paper I wrote in my English class, I approached [the teacher] during the summer and said, "Why don't we do a cellphone collection at HCC?" Because I had found through the research, and writing the paper, that there are organizations where you can collect cellphones and they'll take them and give you money. And that's something that is continuing even now at HCC. Somebody else took it over and the funds from that are going into a scholarship fund. [#6J, Pg. 5]

Although this interview excerpt could have just as easily come out of an interview with a four-year university student – well-rounded development and campus involvement are easily encouraged at all higher education institutions – it is necessary to show that this dynamic plays a very important role to community college students, who are often seen as needing only a practical education devoid of these extras. For Bertrand, it ended up that the coursework and credits became secondary to the larger education and growth he was receiving on campus.

Despite being heavily involved in campus activities, Bertrand still carried out a hectic daily schedule. He worked anywhere from 5 to 7 nights a week waiting tables into the early morning, would go home and get a few hours of sleep, then return for 9 a.m. classes and spend the afternoon engaging with campus activities. When asked how he juggled all this, he emphasized that it was necessary to very carefully strategize, as every minute of the day became important:

Bertrand: [pauses] Uhm... I pursue my education with a sense of strategy. So, I graduated from HCC with a 4.0. And, it's really funny because that certainly is an achievement, and all the other things that I did there are something that I hold on to more. . . . What I learned was that -- in saying that I approach my education with a sense of strategy -- I didn't give 100% to every single class that I took, and I know that. And, part of me feels like... Like I fooled some people.

Interviewer: ...That's how people do it at UMass, that's how you do it.

Bertrand: ...And it's not that... Doing well isn't about, at least for me, giving 100% to everything. It's about knowing which things require more effort than other things. . . I have a lot of things going on, but I've learned to compartmentalize my life and know when I can fit things in and know when I have to say "no" to something and make sure I don't waste time. So I approach my education with a sense of strategy.

Interviewer: And how did that affect your ability to participate on campus, in other things?

Bertrand: I mean, there were times when the fact that I have more financial responsibilities in my life, and so I have to work... That prevented me from being able to do certain things in the evenings that I wanted to do. That's something that I still struggle with. I want to be more involved in my community than I'd like to be [now], but I work in the evenings because I need to so that I can go to school during the day. So I'm prevented from going to political events or, particularly this past weekend was Boston Pride, and a lot of friends went out there, but I have a job that... Where my income is really dependent on working nights and weekends. So the fact that I'm much more dependent on my income than maybe some more traditional-aged students are, sometimes that just kind of gnawed on me a little bit. But it is what it is.²⁰⁴

A central focus in Bertrand's interview was how HCC helped him to overcome his insecurity around schooling. Although I did not ask about childhood backgrounds or childhood schooling with interviewees unless they brought it up, I always asked parent's educational level and occupation: I knew that both Bertrand's parents had not gone to college, and thus he was considered a 'first-generation' college student. In the literature, it is indicated that this affects the sense of entitlement, know-how, and confidence that a student goes into their education with.

Interviewer: Is the way you see yourself now that you are done with HCC different from the way you saw yourself when you started?

Bertrand: Oh yeah, absolutely. . . I took [an honors colloquium] class and the course is really billed as a master's level class. . . I spent a lot of that semester thinking, "I don't belong in here. All of these people are smarter than me." And, by the end of the semester, we kind of discussed our experience in the course and everything, and I stuck it out even though there were a couple of times when I said, you know, "I don't know if I'm doing well in this." Finding out that pretty much everybody else in the class had those very same insecurities. And that was a big thing for me. Like I mentioned, the successful people aren't those who aren't afraid and have it all figured out. It's that they're able to overcome those. . . and that was kind of the point where I realized that. Everybody is kind of afraid and insecure, but just kind of sticking it out. . . I ended up getting an A in the class. When I saw my grade, I literally screamed in my living room. My husband was in the other room and, when it comes time for grades to come out, you're going online and checking your grades like every hour to see if a new grade has been put in, and I'm sitting on my couch and I remember logging in, it was kind of a rainy day just like this, and logging in and seeing the "A" there and I let out a very loud, audible scream. My husband comes running into the room, "What's wrong?" "I got an A in the class!" You know, he was like, "Of course you did." No, *not* "of course" I did! . . . The difference is seeing your fears and insecurities and you have the choice of whether or not to give in to them or push them aside and try it anyway. So really kind of responding to your question is: I still don't know who this person is that is sitting here now, that used to be that shy, scared, insecure guy. But, to me, that's exciting

²⁰⁴ #6J, Pg.8-9

because now that I'm getting ready to start a new journey at a new school, I know who I am right now but there could be somebody... Another incarnation of me in a couple of years.²⁰⁵

Bertrand was aware that, while this transformation as a result of his education at HCC was an emotional and personal one, it also reverberated on a structural level with his family and class position:

Interviewer: ...How have those [outside] relationships been affected by your education at HCC? ...How have they been changed or developed or separated more?

Bertrand: ... my family is all very proud of me and, particularly knowing where I came from; knowing that I've kind of come out of the whole... Statistically, I should have followed the same cycle of living in poverty. You know, I'm probably... If I'm as successful as I want to be, making a... What's the word I'm looking for? You know, when you change from one class to another?

Interviewer: Mobility? Yeah, so social mobility.

Interviewer: Yeah... the social mobility that I might experience in my life is something that probably takes 2 or 3 generations. And a lot of it has honestly been luck. I've had the right people come along at the right time in my life. So my family has a sense of pride.²⁰⁶

Like other interviewees in the 'nontraditional' age category, Bertrand instantly replied that this was the overriding aspect of his identity in the community college setting. Unlike other interviewees, however, he felt that being older empowered him in a variety of ways – towards his coursework, his approach to education, and towards other students:

Interviewer: ...I do kind of want to ask you to think about, you know, when you sat in a classroom, which one of these identities that you walk through life with was most in the forefront of your mind?

Bertrand: Yeah... I think, particularly in my time in the classroom and just on campus in general, I think being a nontraditional student was really the main part of it. I say that because the experiences that I've had up to this point and the life lessons and growth that I've experienced, particularly through my 20's, really informed how I approached my education. I would love to already be through school, but if I had gone to college right out of high school, I wouldn't have been ready. I didn't know what my passions were, I didn't know what I wanted to pursue, and I wouldn't have had certain life lessons and opportunities for growth, through some challenges; through some personal mistakes; as well as through some personal pains that I went through. All of that informed my education. And I think that going to school when I was ready and when I really wanted it really helped me be successful, because I wanted it and I was much more motivated and maybe more inspired to take things on than I might have been right out of high school.

²⁰⁵ #6J, Pg. 12

²⁰⁶ #6J, Pg.19

Interviewer: ...And did you feel that there were many other nontraditional students with you? So it wasn't like this, 'Oh, I'm the only one here that's over the age of 25,' or anything?

Bertrand: No... And the great thing at HCC that I really noticed is there was no division at HCC. In a lot of my classrooms, there was the 18 year old, but there was also the 55 year old. And there was no, 'Oh, the 18 year olds are all [over here]...' No, everyone was just kind of... We were all students together. And I really credit a lot of the traditional age students for not really taking on the attitude of, 'Oh, that's the old [students]...'

Interviewer: ...The 'Oh, we're entitled to be here and you're not' -- There's not that culture?

Bertrand: ...No! It was just, were all kind of students, together. And culturally, ethnically, it is a very diverse student body and everybody just kind of blended. ...I think that being in my 30's really helped me in a lot of ways because people kind of, particularly the younger students that were in clubs or on Student Senate with me, they really kind of looked to me for a little bit of knowledge and wisdom that they hadn't yet gained, which was a trip for me because, I was always kind of the person looking to other people for guidance. So to be in that role was very empowering.²⁰⁷

Lastly, Bertrand brought up the dual issue of the feeling that community colleges are undervalued and stigmatized. Like many other interviewees, he insisted that it is a beneficial first step in higher education for *everyone*, not just those without other options.

Interviewer: And, has being at HCC changed the way you thought about the world? So it's definitely changed the way you thought about yourself. Has it changed the way you thought about society? Politics? Whatever...

Bertrand: It changed the way I thought about community college, that's for sure. I firmly believe that if I had started as a freshman at a four-year college, I would not have had the same success. Because community college is a much more intimate setting, with a lot more opportunity to stand out, I was able to stand out and be successful, and get as involved as I did. Maybe I would have gotten involved had I started at UMass right off. But I think, because it's a bigger campus, it's a lot easier to just get lost in the pack -- it might have been a lot more overwhelming. I'm, for the rest of my life, going to be a champion of the community college experience -- to the point where I think it's something that most people should consider doing before going to a four-year, because it gives you an opportunity to really prove yourself before going to a larger college.

Interviewer: What did you think about community colleges before you started? Did you have a certain perception of them that's changed by you going there?

Bertrand: Well, there's the whole... There is the larger stigma around them. There's the stigma, I guess, of it's where you go if you can't afford a four-year college, or you just... You want to get an associate's before you either go into whatever field.

Interviewer: Did that negative stigma kind of affect you as you began? Did you think about it much? Or were you just like, 'Whatever, I have to go here.'

²⁰⁷ #6J, Pg.14-15

Bertrand: I started off, 'Oh, this is where I have to go,' and then it didn't take long for me to realize the benefits of going to community college. And, you know, I think part of that is a function of specifically the community college I went to. I know that there was a community college in the town that I grew up in in Michigan that is a one-building campus. ...I'm not sure the resources or opportunities are there at a lot of other community colleges.²⁰⁸

Bertrand is pointing to a real fact about Holyoke Community College – it is a particularly well-resourced campus, thanks in part to aggressive corporate partnerships on the part of the administration, as well as a strong focus on the transfer function (as opposed to developing the vocational side of their campus). Nationally, state-wide, and even from city to city, community colleges vary drastically and almost directly reflect local and regional socioeconomic conditions. So it becomes more a part of the cycle of “luck” the community college that students end up at, and whether the particular one they land in offers the same opportunities for personal and intellectual development; as well as the ability to offer the infrastructure, support and resources to meet their educational and work goals.

²⁰⁸ #6J, Pg. 30

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The community college is a pivotal point, primarily for working class people, in both processes of social reproduction and social mobility. Levine and Nidiffer, who interviewed fifty poor and working-class people trying to get into college in the 1980's, found that community colleges serve as the only real option to break into the world of higher education: "For the most part, poor kids grow up to be poor adults, and the cycle continues. Occasionally it breaks, however. One mechanism adults use to better their lives is attending a college, often a local community college."²⁰⁹ Today, this option is being supplanted by for-profit universities, particularly as the community college system is being gentrified and geared towards the needs of younger, 'better-prepared' and more affluent students who technically can go anywhere they want to college, but are using the community college to cut costs.²¹⁰

Penelope Herideen, who completed her study on working-class community college students ten years after Levine and Nidiffer, found that despite overwhelming challenges, "they have hope" in the power of education to transform their lives, whether it be economically, personally or intellectually:

They recognize the obstacles, yet have chosen to make a concerted effort not to let these forces overpower them. They are in school to obtain an education that will lead to a career. They endure hardships because their dreams have not been shattered. They still cling strongly to the ideal of the "American Dream" and meritocracy.²¹¹

However, these hopes and dreams do not diminish the structural reality of the community college in the higher education landscape, and the overall statistical effect on students' educations and trajectories: The most recent and comprehensive report on community college completion rates shows that, since 2007, only 13 to 14 percent of students transfer to four-year

²⁰⁹ Levine, Arthur, and Nidiffer, Jana. 1996. *Beating the odds: how the poor get to college*. Jossey-Bass: California, pg. 109

²¹⁰ An interview with a parent of such a student in the Chicago Tribune clearly illustrates this dynamic, "'I wanted her to have that experience, and we saved for their college our whole life. She could have gone to any college she wanted ... but she doesn't want to waste any time, and she wants to find the right school for her and then transfer. I think she's really smart about it. She is taking the pressure off of her, and I think that is fine. It gives her time to figure it all out.'" Trebe, Patricia, "Growing Number of Students Starting at Community Colleges," in *The Chicago Tribune*: May 3, 2016.

²¹¹ Herideen 1998: 53

institutions.²¹² This is up from twelve percent in the early 1990's (and this inflation might be due to the gentrification dynamic discussed above).²¹³ Jerome Karabel, a leading scholar and critic of the structural reproduction of inequality that community colleges are responsible for, writes, "the junior college was never intended, despite the high aspirations of its students, to provide anything more than a terminal education for most of those who entered it; indeed, at no point in its history did even half of its students transfer to a four-year institution."²¹⁴

Despite this, the community college is still persistently seen by the public as "democracy's college," and continually described by politicians, administrators and media pundits alike as the straightforward solution for our national woes of keeping up with demands for an ever-skilled workforce in the global economy. And the flexible and malleable nature of community colleges (this includes the student population, seen almost as precarious) does seem to present a straightforward solution to corporations looking to cheaply train workers for mid-skill jobs that can't (yet) be offshored. This economic dynamic (business and labor market needs) has been coupled with the cultural meaning of "democracy's college" since the institution's proliferation in the 1950's.²¹⁵ In other words, the cultural articulation between the social mobility that America is supposed to represent and the economic purposes of the community college facilitated each other. A recent press release lauding the CUNY community college system in New York illustrates this articulation clearly:

I have become the world's biggest advocate for community college. I see students that demonstrate a passionate commitment for self-sufficiency . . . The community college students that I teach should be held on a pedestal as true examples of the American Dream. After all, I do tell them that the only thing that stands between them and success is a #2 pencil. The community college and CUNY is the "golden doorknob."²¹⁶

²¹² See: "Community College Completion: Progress Toward Goal of 50% Increase" by American Association of Community Colleges, 2015. 2016 CCRC data confirms this percentage.

²¹³ Dougherty, 1994. This percentage does not take into account the issue of transfer-attrition, or the amount of transfer students who end up dropping out of the four-year due to three factors – lack of financial support, lack of legitimization of work done at the community college, and lack of academic and social support and integration at the receiving transfer university.

²¹⁴ Brint & Karabel, *The Diverted Dream*, Pg. 205

²¹⁵ Ironically, the first mention of community colleges as being "democracy's college" was in the Audit Commission Report of 1958 – a congressional report to research and encourage the national development of community colleges to meet demand for higher education and workforce training for the postwar baby boom. Karabel writes: "The Audit Commission's report placed special emphasis on community colleges as an effective and economical solution to these problems. The commission emphasized the role that the two-year colleges could play both in "extending equality and opportunity" and in "training technical personnel" for business and industry." (Karabel 1989, 145).

²¹⁶ Goldstein, Michelle. 2016. "Seeing is Believing – and Inspiring," in *Community College Daily*. American Association of Community Colleges.

This sentimental view of community colleges is echoed throughout the national dialogue, and has led to periodic bursts of national political interest, as described in the introduction to this paper, that have stakeholders calling out urgently for all kinds of investment – most recently, and perhaps the most ambitious, being the call for free community college tuition for the first two years. During the final writing of this thesis, Massachusetts Republican Governor Charlie Baker passed a first-in-the-nation bill for a tuition waiver that would rebate full-time “qualifying” students for successful completion of their first two years at a community college.²¹⁷ However, the legislation has some fundamental flaws: students must be full-time, enrolled in liberal-arts majors, and finish their associate’s degree in 2.5 years and their bachelor’s degree within an overall 4.5 years. As existing research amply documents, most students would not “qualify” under these conditions. Even within my own sample, a majority of students within the transfer track took over 2.5 years to complete their coursework (due to the issue of having to take remedial classes, among other things). This bill is geared to help a very specific and very small, but growing, middle-class population within the community-college-going demographic, whom are using the community college for a transfer function only – this is certainly not geared towards the majority of students who go to community college and the diverse purposes the community college is used for (nor even the majority of students within my own sample).

If more research existed that was documenting the actual lived conditions and practices of students, bills like this might be constructed to better suit the actual population that uses the community college (and not the imagined and desired population of white, middle-class ‘traditional-aged’ 18 through 24 year-old students). The reality is that the community college is serving a working-class population, and the institution needs to be structured according to this demographic as a priority. So often, political movements and initiatives, and even large-scale national attempts at socioeconomic changes, fail when they forget how much the particularities

²¹⁷ This bill is called the “Commonwealth Commitment” and is to be phased in over the next two years, starting in September 2016. From the Associated Press, “Students from any community college who enroll in one of two dozen fields of study would receive a 10 percent rebate on tuition and fees upon successful completion of each semester, provided they maintained a cumulative grade point average of 3.0 or higher. To continue in the program, students must earn an associate degree from the community college in 2½ years or less, and complete their bachelor's degree at a state university, including any University of Massachusetts campus, in no more than 4½ years total. . . The 24 available majors would not include engineering or nursing, because officials say they are in greater demand and more expensive for universities to run.” Salsberg, Bob, “Mass. Giving Tuition Rebate in Groundbreaking Offer,” in *Associated Press*, April 21, 2016.

of everyday material life can make or break the support of the poor and working class, whom are still in the majority numerically: the interviews here showed that the availability of certain practical resources (such as advisors, certain classes, grants and scholarships, certain kinds of technology, rooms for studying, or even just availability of direct and free public transportation) might have more physical impact on community college students than larger, theoretical goals such as “tuition waivers for qualifying transfer-track students.” Continuing to deny this point will result in the contradictory effects continuing to be seen – namely, the growth of the individual, and inspiring personal stories of transformation, but lack of overall structural educational attainment and progress. This is not to mention a lack of attention to the other dimensions of educational growth discussed throughout this paper (such as subjective, political and intellectual).

A. Summary of findings

This thesis has aimed to show that community colleges may be a straightforward solution for employers or individual students able to climb the ropes of the system into a four-year university; but they are, in reality, far from a straightforward solution to the complex sociological problem of social mobility. Another larger context which has not been discussed here is the particular problems of mobility and reproduction within the historical period of capitalism we are now living in, often termed the “neoliberal” period, which is a bundle of 1970’s economic policies that have been restructuring the whole of society (and the globe) in the image of a corporation: this includes not just obvious things like the workforce and labor market, but also public institutions, social welfare, and even private lives and subjectivities. It is certain that the contradiction of the community college becomes intensified in these times. Paul Willis, writing of this bundle of political and social changes under the neoliberal regime, said, “...These dramatic changes have destroyed or substantially weakened working-class paths from school to work and have shaken the material foundations of traditional working-class cultural forms.”²¹⁸ This weakened path is what this study has aimed to explore. My goal has been to describe the life situations and experiences of students at three local community colleges, in the hopes of better understanding this invisible, but very large, national student population. It has also been to

²¹⁸ Willis in Dolby and Dimitriadis, 2004: 182 - 183

explore what different dimensions of success and growth, and what different questions, could be asked of the community college's role in social reproduction.

B. Limitations

There are several limitations to the stage of this research in addition to the ones discussed methodologically (the partiality of this ethnographic attempt, the lack of longitudinal data with interviewees, and the interpretive issues with centering findings solely around interviews). The first limitation being very general and broad. I do believe this topic is a politically urgent research for someone interested in any of the concerns of critical cultural studies to take up. The intersections of *power*, *culture* and *meaning*, and *structure/determination* and how these concretize in daily social life, is not absent from this topic. The hope of this paper is that it showed that clearly.

The second is the dearth of existing research as pertains to the specificity of the community college. While many studies exist of the community college, they come out of disciplinary frameworks that severely limit the perspective and questions being asked. This was discussed in the introduction and literature review. The overwhelming focus is on static quantitative factors that deny the larger complexity of the problem of social mobility. Or otherwise, the community college is treated only as a potential field site for other research concerns, and not seen as a fundamental structuring reality in its own right. Even on a statistical level, community college measures (such as transfer, enrollment, attrition, degree completion, earnings) are notoriously difficult to track – even using trusted measures such as those done through the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Census, and the National Student Clearinghouse. A report by the American Association of Community Colleges discusses this methodological difficulty (the full quote is included to show the level of complexity in collecting this data):

There are a lot of data on the number of credentials awarded by community colleges. However, it can be difficult to interpret this data to understand the role community colleges are taking in increasing the number of individuals who have a high quality credential. There are two separate sources of information that can help answer this, but neither provides a complete picture of the role community colleges play in addressing the goals. One source of data is institutional reports of credentials conferred as reported annually to the US Department of Education. While these provide a good accounting of the actual number of degrees and certificates conferred, it is problematic because many students earn more than one credential. Therefore, using these data one cannot differentiate between students who are earning their first credential, or their fourth credential. While a student who earns four credentials will likely see a benefit from each of them (many colleges are creating stackable credentials to help move individuals along a career

pathway), by counting each of these awards individually we over-represent the number of individuals in the country who have a credential of value. As second source of data come from levels of educational attainment in the US, as collected through the US Bureau of the Census. These data allow us to determine the number of individuals in the US by varying levels of educational attainment, but these data do not account for a large number of individuals who have certificates that have significant labor market value, nor can the attribute the credential to the type of institution which awarded the degree. . . *Data typically used to answer the question on increasing the rate of completions is also problematic. Graduation rates collected by the US Department of Education have several significant limitations, such as only including students who start full-time and only following students for a limited number of years.* Therefore, these data provide only a limited view of how well colleges are doing at increasing their completion rates.²¹⁹ [emphasis mine]

It is not that paying attention to these kinds of measures is unimportant – they are vital to getting a bigger picture. It is more that the actual reality of students ‘nontraditional’ life paths, that do not follow linear trajectories and often see education taking many more years, are harder to fit into these quantitative tracking measures. Therefore, this data needs to be utilized with caution and with recognition of the elements that are left out.

However, it is not that research into community colleges do not exist from a critical sociological, even Marxist, framework. Larger questions around class, power and social reproduction in the community college began to be asked during the political and economic turmoil of the 1970’s by Bowles & Gintis (1976), and later by Brint & Jerome Karabel (1989); in the 90’s, this tradition was continued by Dougherty (1994), Herideen (1994), Clark Kerr (1991, 1994) and Zachary Karabel (1998), who began to add a missing analysis of the structuring effects of racial difference in education. Even with the research produced by the scholars above, Penelope Herideen points out that, “the majority of these [community college] critics are professors at four-year institutions... [and] regard the community college as a vastly inferior version of the four-year college in terms of scholarship, quality of education, and the skills of both faculty and students.”²²⁰

In the current decade, this research framework has died out in regards to the community college specifically, but many innovative studies on social reproduction in broader higher education exist: namely, Rivera’s *Pedigree* (2015), Putnam’s *Our Kids* (2015), Armstrong’s

²¹⁹ “Community College Completion: Progress Toward Goal of 50% Increase” by American Association of Community Colleges, 2015: Pg.2-4

²²⁰ Herideen 1998: Pg. 3. She also discusses the classification of community college critics into three categories: mainstream, structural and elite. She writes, “Mainstream critics support and reaffirm the institution’s democratic mission . . . Structural critics believe that without substantial social and economic transformation, the community college cannot deliver upward mobility or a better quality of life.”

Paying for the Party (2013), Peter Sacks' *Tearing Down the Gates* (2007), Cowie's *Stayin' Alive* (2010), Bettie's *Women Without Class* (2003), and even Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods* (2003) can be said to have implications for higher education, and thus community college, research. Most of these studies, by necessity, take the form of ethnographies. Though critical cultural studies developed in Britain in the 1970's – where there was a different class structure to society, and a different education system – concerns around education and social reproduction along more expansive and complex lines were first articulated by Raymond Williams, and then Paul Willis, as discussed in the literature review.

To attempt to address these issues, this paper has combined the empirical work of Penelope Herideen (1998), who was one of the first to center a qualitative research study solely around community college students, with the analytical and theoretical contributions of Paul Willis, whose contribution to the study of social reproduction has much to yield to cultural studies, the study of the cultural politics of working class life, and studies of education. This thesis hopes to be of broad relevance to these types of areas of study.

C. Future Directions

There are three unique areas which need to be explored in more depth, from a qualitative perspective, in regards to the social role of the community college: making more visible the undocumented student population that uses this institution as a first-access point to higher education; the role of the community college in providing education in rural America, where national college-going rates are still lower than in urban centers; last, the role of the community college in providing prisoner education programs as part of larger rehabilitation strategies. In these three areas, community colleges in my sample and nationally shoulder most of the responsibility in the higher education system for providing access, yet research into these areas is lacking. As argued throughout this thesis, the weaknesses of the community college that contribute in some senses to reproduction of inequality (such as their flexible and malleable nature, often corporatized, for instance) are also the dynamics which have the potential to make it the most democratic and politically progressive form of higher education in the nation, depending on the actions of people working within and leading community colleges. In these three areas – undocumented students, prisoner education, and rural education – it is the case that community colleges become the sole form of higher education access, and their response to these

populations will tell which direction the community college goes in, whether that of neoliberalism or progressivism.

Community colleges could benefit from research that makes them more aware of the needs of the growing undocumented student population they will be serving: it is estimated that close to 1.76 million ‘unauthorized’ immigrant youths will be looking for higher education access.²²¹ This is in part due to the recent federal DACA policy (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), a severely weakened compromise of the original DREAM act, which allows certain undocumented youth reprieve from deportation and the ability to work legally provided they meet certain educational requirements. One of the ways undocumented youths can meet the educational requirement is to enroll in a “qualifying education program,” which includes an accredited community college.²²² The experiences of the undocumented students in my sample was that there was virtually no information or support provided by the institution: not only were no resources offered, but official staff often had no idea what to do in terms of simple things such as registration forms, financial aid, and student health insurance issues. Students had to network among themselves and find out informal and underhanded ways to go around the bureaucratic system just to complete simple things that students with citizenship take for granted, such as enrolling for courses, fulfilling the health insurance requirement, and finding transportation. Two students in the sample had, by luck, found a counselor willing to work with them and research these issues on her own. How many undocumented community college students don’t find such a person?

The Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education released a report recognizing the urgency of this topic, yet their recommendations were far from specific to the unique challenges undocumented students face. Their five recommendations were as broad as “increase college access,” “provide financial assistance to make college more affordable,” “support college readiness and success,” “offer alternatives for adult learners,” and “improve college retention and completion”²²³ – the same recommendations offered for success of *all*

²²¹ Casner-Lotto, Jill. 2012. “Dreaming Big: What community colleges can do to help undocumented immigrant youth achieve their potential,” by *Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education*. <http://cccie.org/images/stories/Dreaming_Big_Exec_Summary.pdf>

²²² “DACA Educational Requirements,” from the Immigrant Legal Resource Center. <http://www.ilrc.org/files/documents/ilrc-daca-education_req_faq-2013-02_28.pdf> Accessed April 17, 2016.

²²³ Casner-Lotto, Jill. 2012. “Dreaming Big: What community colleges can do to help undocumented immigrant youth achieve their potential,” by *Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education*: Pg.3.

community college students. Undertaking qualitative studies could help to figure out what is lacking in the institution from the undocumented student's perspective, so that appropriate reforms and policies could be built from the ground up, instead of from the offices of administrative officials and think-tanks.

The second area is the role of the community college in providing higher education in lower-income rural areas, which are largely geographically and socioeconomically shut out of higher education. Many studies continually document this disparity. Recently, the National Student Clearinghouse (which collects data on close to 95% of all college-going students at both public and private schools) found that students from rural schools have the lowest college-going rates and persistence rates among all categories of high school graduates.²²⁴ A 2013 longitudinal study by Michael Koricich, an education professor at Texas Tech University, has perhaps the most telling data in regards to rural students and higher education: he found that 64% of rural students pursue any postsecondary education (compared to 66% nationally and 70% in metro areas). Of those rural students who do attend any postsecondary schooling, 47% attend a community college (compared to 38% of students living in metro areas).²²⁵ In fact, the stagnation of national college-completion rates is largely due to the lower percentages in rural areas.²²⁶ The report also brought up the resulting "brain drain" that rural areas suffer when students migrate to urban centers for higher education and/or worker training. Not only does it erode the tax base and the local economy, it leads to the gutting of public social services, one of which being local education systems, creating a vicious feedback loop in terms of college readiness and attendance.²²⁷

According to 2010 Census data (the most recent), upwards of 60 million Americans live in rural areas, and the average gap in median family income between rural and urban residents is 25% -- factor into this that rural poverty is often greater for people of color and immigrants, and this population is only growing.²²⁸

²²⁴ "National College Progression Rates: For High Schools participating in the National Student Clearinghouse StudentTracker service," *National Student Clearinghouse Research Center High School Benchmarks Report*, 2013. The six categories of students compared were low income, high minority, urban; low income, low minority, urban; low income, rural; higher income, high minority urban; higher income, low minority urban; higher income, rural.

²²⁵ Koricich, Andrew. "The Effects of Rurality on College Access and Choice." Accessed April 17, 2016.

²²⁶ Koricich, 2016: pg.6

²²⁷ Koricich, 2016: Pg. 6

²²⁸ Koricich, 2016: pg. 5 / See also Bureau of Labor Statistics Economic News Release, "College Enrollment and Work Activity of 2015 High School Graduates," at <<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgec.nr0.htm>>.

Community colleges located in rural areas are embarking on unique, if not unorthodox, strategies to mitigate this problem of under-access to higher education. Not only are they devising plans for their own “College Promise” type of programs, named “Rural Promise,” but they are expanding these programs for the needs of rural students – for example, including vocational training in their funding of the first two years of college. Initiatives are currently being developed at community colleges in Arkansas, rural Ohio and Michigan, Virginia and Missouri).²²⁹ Some community colleges are even resorting to contracting private firms to build them mobile classrooms, dubbed “College on Wheels,” to bring classes to students located in remote areas.²³⁰ These are all facts that point to the continued need to sustained research attention on the ways that community colleges function in rural areas, and ways in which they both serve *and* hinder rural students.

The last area of needed research into the social role of the community college is of its role in providing prisoner education programs. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, upwards of 7 million people are currently under correctional supervision (this includes those imprisoned, on probation, and on parole). Of this number, 2.5 million of these men, women and children are incarcerated, and eventually will need to go back into their homes and communities.²³¹ Research has documented that providing education to prisoners not only increases critical job skills and sense of self-worth but involves the prisoner in building sustainable social relationships that help reduce chances of recidivism, and increases their success in going back into their community. As a local example, the Franklin County Sheriff’s Office is partnered with Greenfield Community College to provide post-secondary education classes to prisoners through the national “Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program”²³² and their program has been recognized as a model of excellence by the Obama administration, in terms of

²²⁹ Ashford, Ellie. “Rural Promise programs meet local needs,” in *Community College Daily* by American Association of Community Colleges. May 10, 2016.

²³⁰ Phelps, Nathan, “Colleges on wheels picks up students,” *Green Bay Press Gazette*. Feb 16, 2016.

²³¹ See Bureau of Justice Statistics, “Correctional Populations in the United States, 2014,” accessed here <<http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=5519>>

²³² This is a national program founded by Temple University instructor Lori Pompa in 1997, and has been working since then to bring together college students and prisoners to study together as peers. The original idea was conceived by a prisoner serving life, in his words, a space where students and prisoners “could maintain an ongoing dialogue and delve into the root issues of crime together, where individuals could ask questions, address stereotypes, and examine criminal justice literature – in the context of honesty, authenticity, and trust.” See <<http://www.insideoutcenter.org/history.html>>

lessening recidivism rates.²³³ Across the nation, similar partnerships between prisons and community colleges are being developed²³⁴ that are suited to the specific needs of that community. Whether community colleges and prisons partner together through necessity only, or through innovative programs such as Inside-Out that have more of a philosophical commitment to progressivism (which also works with four-year universities, but does not provide credentials or certificates to the prisoner), this is a profoundly democratic and progressive role that the community college fulfills. However, little is known about these partnerships (beyond press releases), and no academic scholarship is produced on how prisoners experience themselves as students, and how the community college adapts to the needs of the prison. Despite this, postsecondary education could become seen as more of a fundamental human right, and a national effort to build the capacity of community colleges to partner with prisons could be used as one of the tools in remedying our broken criminal justice system.

²³³ See: The Recorder, “Sheriff Donelan Headed to DC to talk offender re-entrance in community.” May 11, 2016. <<http://www.recorder.com/Archives/2015/11/sheriffconference-gr-111315>>.

²³⁴ One particularly innovative example is in Washington State between a community college and military prison, set up to provide vocational training in horticulture, engineering and carpentry (to name a few fields). This kind of a partnership is in direct opposition to the current trend of using prisoners as an unskilled, unpaid slave labor force. <<http://ccdaily.com/Pages/Campus-Issues/A-unique-partnership-aims-to-help-military-inmates.aspx>>

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