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A Community of Capital: Leveraging Peer Networks at Community Colleges

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A Community of Capital:
Leveraging Peer Networks at Community Colleges

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Abstract

This thesis uses theories of social and cultural capital to explain how community college students are capital-rich individuals who navigate their community colleges with strategies that reflect and build on their class habitus. In depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 46 traditional-aged college students at Midwestern Community College. Qualitative analysis revealed that students' social and cultural capital allows them to experience the community college in four distinct ways: as an Involved Student Leader, a Visiting Collegian, a Free Rider, or a Determined but Disconnected student. Involved Student Leaders and Visiting Collegians, with institution-valued forms of capital, have socially and academically integrated experiences at the college, and work to extend their capital to others. Free Riders' low academic orientation but middle class habitus is amenable to being on the receiving end of capital exchange. Determined but Disconnected students have mismatched strategies and forms of capital that exclude them from the active exchange and acquisition of social and cultural capital at the community college. Student experiences reveal that community college is a field in which students are actors who aid in each other's success. However, this level of higher education must value all forms of social and cultural capital if it is to be an institution where all students have an equal chance at succeeding.

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Introduction

America is experiencing a moment in which how we "fund, govern, access, and experience college" are all changing (Stevens and Kirst, 2015). We live in a "college-for-all" culture where students expect to be able to navigate their entrance into adulthood by using college as a tool (Rosenbaum, 2001). While college used to be a place where students were expected to conform to the elite, hierarchical structure of higher education, students are increasingly demanding that institutions of higher learning meet their needs. The rise of MOOCs and for-profit education institutions also reflect that higher education is developing a more market-driven supply-demand structure (Stevens and Kirst, 2015). Community colleges, then, have the possibility of being on the frontier of higher education (Stevens and Kirst, 2015). Even now, nearly half (44%) of all American college students attend community college. A disproportionate number of community college students are low-income, first generation, and/or from marginalized racial groups (Carnevale and Strohl, 2003; CCRC, 2015). These students are trailblazing a path of social and economic mobility for their families. In this moment, we cannot risk misunderstanding their experiences at the two year college; we must be forward thinking about how this level of higher education can be a mobility maker in the 21st century.

Historically, the sociological debate about what it takes to make it through community college has been an overly deterministic theory about the institution "cooling out" student aspirations (Clark, 1960). Sociological research on community colleges has been primarily organizational research resting on the assumption that students have "vague and contradictory goals" (Brint and Karabel, 1989), and more institutional structure is needed in order to help students clarify goals and improve success rates, however success may be defined (Rosenbaum,

et. al., 2007). Other community college research has been largely quantitative analyses of high attrition rates, although these attrition rates are oftentimes misleading because it is erroneous to assume that students finish college where they start it.

I echo the sentiments of scholars who argue that research must uproot the conventional and possibly outdated assumption that students have vague and contradictory goals. Scholars nowadays are calling for a clearer understanding of how community college students make decisions about their career goals, academic navigation, and integration into the college. Qualitative research can be especially helpful for bringing out students' voices and elucidating their experiences, and, in so doing, enriching sociological definitions of students' hopes and aspirations as well as deepening social scientists' understanding of how and under what circumstances community colleges contribute to human, social, and cultural capital.

This thesis seeks to understand how traditional-aged community college students navigate this institution in search of themselves, their career path, and a secure future. What strategies do students use for navigating the institution, and how do they make meaning of their circuitous route through higher education? This thesis grounds student experiences in Bourdieu's theories of social and cultural capital (1983) and Yosso's cultural wealth model (2005) in order to explain how all students are capital-rich. Some have the institution-valued forms of capital that are known to help them access school resources and support networks. Others come from cultures that nurture them with a wealth of capital that may be undervalued in the higher education field (Yosso, 2005). How are differences in capital reflected in how students experience community college? The broader themes that this thesis explores are students' agency in the face of uncertainty, their willingness to trust the community college as an institution that

structures their lives, and their overall aspirations, hopefulness, and confidence.

Interviews were conducted at a community college in the Midwest, here referred to as Midwestern Community College (MCC). In 2013 MCC was highly ranked by Community College Week Report. Indeed, many students reported wanting to attend MCC's Eastern Campus because of its reputation for being a studious work environment that is home to hardworking students like themselves. The college has campuses located in the metropolitan area and surrounding suburbs. Interviews for this project were conducted at MCC's Eastern Campus. Eastern Campus caters to traditional-aged students seeking to attain a bachelor's degree, as it has articulation agreements with four-year colleges across the state as well as honors programs and extracurricular activities for twenty-somethings. The campus also boasts about its numerous health-related job training programs, which include Nursing, Optical Technology and Sport and Exercise Studies. In total, 46 students were interviewed. Seventy-eight percent of the respondents were African American and eleven percent were white. Two Asians/pacific islanders, two international students, and one hispanic student was also interviewed. Fifty-six percent of the respondents were male and forty-four percent were female. The average age of interviewees was 20 years old and students had completed, on average, 2.27 semesters at MCC.

Chapters one and two outline my point of entry into scholarly literature and describe my study method and data. Beginning my empirical analysis, chapter three describes the experience of the Involved Student Leaders (ISLs) at MCC. These students reveal that one's time at a community college can be quite vibrant. They come to MCC not only to attain a credential, but also to involve themselves in personally enriching and capital-enriching student activities. ISLs are heavily involved in campus life, take up campus jobs, head the student government, and play

on the college's sports teams. Being an Involved Student Leader has many benefits which equip these students for success. Their involvement on campus connects them to similarly ambitious peers and staff members who can help them succeed at MCC. ISLs reveal that community college can be an institution in which minority students are well supported, their characteristics are valued, and structures in place help students' assets work towards their academic and career goals instead of against them.

Chapter four looks at Visiting Collegians (VCs), called this because they only mean to attend the college briefly in order to pick up a semester's worth of credits, then return to another college or university campus that they call home. VCs come to MCC having already acquired the skills and mindset necessary to succeed. Their academic skills mean that they do not need the most robust support services at MCC, only an environment free of distractions and conducive to studying. VCs are largely disillusioned by party-centric college culture, and therefore they embrace MCC as a place to buckle down and get work done. Because of their savvy at navigating higher education, VCs are as essential an asset to MCC as Involved Student Leaders. In short, they're an exemplary model to other students of what it's like to be a transfer-oriented community college student.

Chapter five examines a group of students called Free Riders because of the skills and college know-how that they pick up by observing and befriending their visiting or involved peers. Many Free Riders are first-time college students coming straight from high school. Some are students who transferred from a university or job training program, but have yet to acquire the skills that will equip them for a successful transfer-oriented experience. Free Riders usually got into MCC with the aid of a parent or high school guidance counselor. Once students are in

college, parents and other adult figures are not extremely helpful in getting them through college. Getting through MCC could seem altogether daunting for Free Riders, if it weren't for the Involved Student Leaders who show them that thriving in college is possible.

Chapter six describes students who do not reap the benefits of watching their peers strategically use the community college to achieve their academic and career goals. Of the 46 students interviewed, 40% fit in this Determined but Disconnected category. These students come to MCC with high hopes but without much college-oriented capital. This category is reminiscent of the Visiting Collegian group, in that they understand that coming to community college is the "adult" decision to make, and they're determined to get through college as quickly as possible. The difference is that Determined but Disconnected students are not connected to MCC resources, nor do they have another institution to call home. Determined to achieve the career goals that they hold onto dearly as hope for a more secure future, these students made it to college, which was already a considerable feat. However, getting through college is another feat, and they are disconnected from the peer network detailed in chapters three, four, and five. More than anything, these students show that grit and self-determination may keep students afloat, but it is unlikely to get a student through college if she still does not have the support necessary to learn how to achieve academic success. The Determined but Disconnected student's work ethic and hopefulness could be a huge asset for the community college, if only that student was plugged into the right network.

The four empirical chapters capture four kinds of experiences that traditional-aged community college students can have as they swirl through higher education. Because the community college experience is a dynamic one, it is possible for a Determined but

Disconnected student to become an Involved Student Leader, or a Free Rider to become a Visiting Collegian. It is also possible for a Visiting Collegian to become a Determined but Disconnected student. This qualitative study of community college students does not attempt to calculate the likelihood of these transitions between groups, or even to calculate the possibility of any particular student transferring out of MCC and achieving his career goal. Descriptions of these four groups are meant to illuminate particular kinds of student experiences, and indeed some experiences seem to set students on a more successful trajectory and point to a more secure future than other experiences.

Taken together, these groups reveal that the overwhelming majority of students are hard working and decide to come to community college to make a better future for themselves. But all groups also reveal that the path through higher education is precarious. And for students with less institution-valued forms of social and cultural capital, finding interdependence in peer networks at community college is especially difficult. The financial support and guidance of family members, the capital shared between friends, and structured programs offered by colleges are all essential to a student's success. In other words, getting through college requires a matrix of public and private support. If any of the three aforementioned support systems is weak, then the road to graduation is not easy. Indeed, for most students, the road to graduation is not easy. Many families do not have the resources to support students, and community colleges are overburdened yet underfunded institutions. Consequently, peers turn to each other to exchange capital and receive support. That is why peer networks are at the heart of this study on community colleges, and the plea from this thesis is to stop seeing community college students as people who just need to try a little harder or be a little smarter, but instead to see students as

the one of the main assets of community colleges. The more that collegiate institutions connect

students to each other, the better off every student will be.

Chapter 1 - Literature Review

A Portrait of Community College Students

Nearly half (46%) of all undergraduate students in America are enrolled at a community college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015). Sixty percent of community college students are enrolled in credit programs, with the remaining forty percent being enrolled in noncredit programs (AACC, 2015). Most students are part-time, while 39% are full-time students. Community college students are demographically diverse, due to the fact that these institutions have a number of features (such as their location, low cost, and open access enrollment) that lend themselves to attracting more socially, economically and academically disadvantaged students (Goldrick-Rabb, 2010). The average age of students is 28, with nearly half of students being between the age of 22 and 39. Students have unconventional educational backgrounds, with about 19% coming into the institution with a GED as opposed to a high school diploma (CCRC, 2015). As a result, students are more likely to be in need of remedial coursework, and "spend a longer time taking such courses" (Karp, et al., 2008).

Community colleges absorb most American college students of color; 61%, 57%, and 52% of Native American, Hispanic and Black college students are at community college respectively (AACC, 2015). Black and Hispanic students comprise 30% of the community college student population. The community college also absorbs a disproportionate number of low-income students, with 44% of low-income students attending community college (CCRC, 2015). About 25% of community college students' families earn less than 125% of the federal poverty line. Fifty-eight percent of community college students receive some sort of financial aid, 38% receive federal grants, and 19% receive federal loans. Moreover, many community college

students face basic need insecurity: 33% go hungry and 14% are homeless (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). Even though community college students may be nontraditional, they are usually trailblazing a pathway to college for their families, as 36% are first generation college students. They are also likely to have busy non-academic lives: 62% of full-time community college students are also part-time or full-time employees. Furthermore, 17% of students are single parents (AACC, 2015).

While the community college seems to provide a unique opportunity for economic mobility, attrition rates at this level of higher education are notoriously high. Studies of community college students in Virginia and Washington reveal that 20 to 25% of students stay for only one term (CCRC, 2015). Sixty percent of students do not earn a credential within six years (CCRC, 2015), while 16% go on to transfer and complete a four-year degree within six years. These persistence rates are similar for black males, with national data revealing that 83% of black males who start at community college will not achieve a certificate or degree within six years (Wood and Williams, 2013). According to a study of three different community colleges located in three different states, students who are older, white, or in an occupational program are the most likely to graduate (Bremer et. al., 2013). Thus, students of color and traditional-aged, degree-seeking students are in need of more support.

Attrition and persistence rates may be discouraging, but there are more promising statistics. About two thirds of students who persist from their first to second year end up attaining a credential within five years (CCRC, 2015). Moreover, there could be more community college transfer students who are completing four year degrees but are not presented in the statistics, due

to the fact that federal reports on graduation rates only show graduation rates for students who start and complete their degree at the same institution (CCRC, 2015).

Community college students are taking especially unique routes through higher education. They are known to 'swirl' through higher education, or go through multiple institutions before finally receiving a bachelor's degree (Selingo, 2012). A 2012 study by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center found that one third of all college students transfer institutions before receiving a bachelor's degree. Of all undergraduate students, community college students are the most likely to transfer, and have the most non-traditional routes through higher education than any other group of undergraduates. Swirling patterns make it difficult for institutions to know how to best serve and retain students, and oftentimes colleges' support structures fail to reach out to these students. Furthermore, institutions oftentimes have to find creative ways to fill gaps in students' knowledge and create policies for accepting certain transfer credits (Bailey et al., 2015). Swirling patterns also have an effect on students. More often than not, they turn a traditional college student into one who enrolls part-time and experiences more stops and starts in his college education. This calls on the student to interact with the educational institution in a very different and more challenging way (Borden, 2004).

There are many schools of thought pertaining to why community college students may choose (or resign to) swirling through higher education. Researcher Peter Bahr (2011) reveals that students swirl because they come into the institution with varied goals and objectives. According to Bahr, there are six "clusters" of first-time student behaviors: the drop-in, experimental, noncredit, vocational, transfer, and exploratory clusters. Drop-in and experimental students are the ones who do not remain in the community college for long. Drop-in students

take about two courses, but an astounding 94% complete their coursework. Experimental students are different from drop-ins in that they are usually part-time students and have low completion rates – 26 percent, on average. Experimental students are usually 20-22 years old when they enter college for the first time. The experimental cluster also over-represents disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups.

On the other hand, the exploratory and transfer clusters reflect "a continuum of transfer-oriented behavior" (Bahr, 2011, p. 4). Both clusters comprise first-time students with about full-time course loads. Most of the classes they take offer transferrable credit. Successful course completion rates are 73 and 71 percent, respectively. The difference between the transfer and exploratory cluster students is that exploratory students remain in the community college for a shorter period of time. They stay for an average of six semesters and do not take many core math or life science courses. On the other hand, students in the transfer cluster remain in the community college for 13 semesters on average, and, overall, attempt more course credits. They take "more credits of transferable science, transferable humanities, core math, and core English, than do students in any other cluster" (p. 5).

Students in Bahr's terminal vocational cluster enroll in full time course loads with mostly non-transferable courses. They graduate at very high rates, 80%, and are in the community college for an average of nine semesters. Noncredit students are comparable to the transfer students in that they remain in the system for a long time. However, their reason for attending community college is quite different. Bahr found that in California, noncredit students used the community college for educational programs for adults, English as a second language courses, short-term vocational programs and health and safety education.

How exactly do first-time students fare in community colleges, and where do they fit into these clusters? Bahr (2010) found that 30 percent of first-time students were in the drop-in cluster, 28 percent were experimental, 23 percent were exploratory, 14 percent were transfer, 3 percent terminal vocational and one percent were non-credit. Bahr's research also reveals that students may switch their reason for being in the community college, and transfer between community colleges. Lateral transfer, in fact, is extremely common (Bahr, 2012).

Bahr's work is original in that it shows that high attrition rates at the community college can be explained, at least in part, by students' own decisions to enter and exit the institution, or "swirl" through higher education. For example, students whom Bahr profiles as 'drop-ins' come in with goals of personal development or to maintain a license. Using their own definitions of success, the drop-in success rate is nearly 100%. But because community colleges define success as gaining a degree credential, drop-ins have failed, and contribute to the low success rates of two year colleges.

Bahr's work is also helpful because it sets up a nice framework for understanding community college student experiences. He even includes a framework for making the qualitative and quantitative literature on community college students more cohesive. Bahr calls for quantitative work like his to use transcript data to describe student pathways and resultant outcomes, while qualitative work should seek to understand how students make choices about school, and what meaning students assign to their choices (Bahr, 2013). Such a comprehensive research agenda can elucidate students' experiences in community college and get a grasp on what factors most contribute to student success.

What Makes for a Successful Community College Experience: In Theory and Practice

Many scholars of social reproduction use Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of habitus, field, and capital to explain why mobility between classes is unusual, and why some individuals experience more success in their pursuit of upward mobility than others. Because the community college is a site where many young adults are trying to make upward mobility a reality, it is helpful to ground the discussion in this theory.

Bourdieu's theory starts by understanding that individuals interact in various fields throughout their lifetimes (1983). Fields are social contexts with their own culture, values, and power dynamics. Consequently, fields are not easy to learn how to navigate. Operating with competency and ease in a certain field requires knowledge of how that field functions, as well as the specific kinds of capital that are valued by that field. Money (Bourdieu's economic capital) and social networks and relationships (Bourdieu's social capital) can help people get by or acquire power and influence in a certain field.

But most important to Bourdieu's theory of how people navigate the social world is cultural capital, or the collection of tastes, preferences, behaviors, skill sets, credentials, and experiences that help people fit into the culture of a certain field. Individuals use cultural capital in its embodied state, objectified state, and institutionalized state. Embodied cultural capital is the knowledge of a certain culture, and it manifests in the way individuals talk, carry themselves, and interact with others. Objectified cultural capital refers to specific objects that are valued in a culture. Institutionalized cultural capital is the reward that society confers, most commonly in the form of a degree, award, or credential, to those who have the valued cultural capital of the society at large.

All individuals have certain kinds of social and cultural capital, and can operate in some fields more competently than in others. According to Bourdieu, this is due to the fact that individuals have their own habitus. As a result of growing up in a certain social setting, people internalize the social setting they are most intimately familiar with, and operate using the logic of that social setting. Bourdieu's theory essentially argues that one's habitus heavily shapes the way she uses her economic, social, and cultural capital, and informs the way she operates in, and is accepted by, any particular field. Bourdieu's theory is not deterministic, as it argues that people's actions do not have to be wholly determined by the habitus in which they evolved. Furthermore, social, cultural, and economic capital can be acquired, which allows for economic mobility in society. However, Bourdieu's theory does argue that cultural capital is an insidious mechanism for producing and reproducing inequality. If cultural capital is mostly the result of people's habitus, and some cultural capital is valued more than others, then it is no wonder that society is so stratified along social, economic, and cultural lines.

Bourdieu's theories underpin the community college literature that explains how some students find themselves able to access support and resources, while others struggle and find these resources inaccessible. The literature argues that the community college is its own field, which privileges some kinds of cultural and social capital over others. Karp (2011) explains that services at the junior college are ideally meant to help students with "(1) creating social relationships, (2) clarifying aspirations and enhancing commitment, (3) developing college know-how, and (4) addressing conflicting demands of work, family and college." Services such as these help students who are full time adults manage their responsibilities and integrate into college life. In theory, these support services also function to make up for many students' lack of

dominant social and cultural capital. But in reality, these services operate as a stratifying mechanism, and unintentionally perpetuate inequality by only reaching the students who have the middle-class capital that compels them to interact with such programs (Karp, 2011).

In a study by Purnell and Blank (2004), community college administrators and staff believed college services were effective, accessible to all, and well-known around campus. Student reports, on the other hand, revealed that only students with high social and cultural capital were able to use these services. Thus, there was a disconnect between students and staff. Other studies confirm that support services are structured so that only students with college knowledge, social know-how and personal motivation are able to access them (Rosenbaum, et al., 2006). The community college encourages and privileges certain students and affords some students more opportunities for economic mobility than others (Karp, et. al., 2008).

Beyond having more access to the college, the right forms of cultural capital can help students take greater ownership of their education. Students who come into college with cultural capital valued by the education system oftentimes feel more entitled to their education, and therefore are more likely to persist (Berger, 2000). Wells (2008) also found that students coming into community college with more social and cultural capital are more likely to persist. Therefore, the feeling of not being entitled to an education could haunt community college students, as many of them are lacking the institution-valued forms of cultural capital (Wells, 2008).

One question that both Bourdieu's theory and the case studies bring to surface is - are institution-valued forms of cultural capital necessary to succeed? In other words, does one have to get along with professors and celebrate the community college's support services in order to

succeed? Or are there more creative, less conventional ways to achieve academic success? Yosso (2005) extends the mobility argument in Bourdieu's theory, and critiques researchers who use the concept of cultural capital to assert that students from minority backgrounds are culturally deficient. Implicit in a lot of scholarly research is a deficit model – the idea that students of color do not have the skills necessary to succeed. In contrast, Yosso's community cultural wealth model explains that racial minorities in America do not control the cultural capital that dominates society, but they do indeed have their own wealth of capital. Communities of color nurture their young people with the skills necessary for thriving in both their own communities and in communities that generally do not accommodate them. These skills include aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital. Aspirational capital is a racial minority's ability to "dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals" (p. 78). Navigational capital is the ability to persist through social settings such as the education system despite the presence of racism and high levels of stress. Navigational capital is resilience. Resistant capital, on the other hand, is the ability to use one's mind, body, and spirit to oppose and challenge unequal environments. Such capital has the ability to transform oppressive structures, but also can be self-defeating when used inappropriately. Yosso also includes familial capital, as commitment to one's community, and social capital, as relationships and resources from the community, in order to emphasize the point that social capital does not only exist in high-powered circles. For students of color who are constantly told by the education system that they are deficient, all of these forms of capital are indispensable. For researchers seeking to understand how students of color navigate school, recognizing these forms of capital is imperative.

Some literature uses the community cultural wealth model to explain how students of color succeed in the two year institution. Sandoval-Lucero et al., (2014) found that degree-attaining African American and Latina(o) community college students have aspirational capital, family capital, non-dominant social capital, and navigational capital. Their social capital comes in the form of campus engagement, familial support, and relationships with faculty.

However, most literature explains how possessing social and cultural capital from a marginalized social setting is a double-edged sword. Shaw, et al., argue that "when such students do not possess the cultural capital valued by the dominant culture, they may attempt to adopt dominant values, which are often reflected in the culture of institutions such as community colleges. However, they may also develop an oppositional culture which directly challenges the legitimacy of the dominant culture" (1999, p. 2). Jenson and Worth (2014) argue that "The cultural capital [some students] bring to the classroom, while not resistant to the values of the academic field, does not necessarily prepare them to be critical scholars or to appreciate the role of a student. Their dispositions toward academic work, however, are not incompatible with the economic field of credentialing in which they engage. This irony, that they can be successful in negotiating the system without success in their studies, causes tension in the classroom" (p. 288). If students are challenging the legitimacy of community colleges' cultural capital (Shaw et al., 1999; Jenson and Worth, 2014) and community colleges are challenging the legitimacy of students' capital (Rosenbaum, et al., 2006; Karp, et. al., 2008), it is no wonder that students are unable to develop clear academic goals, and thus end up not attaining a credential.

Quantitative research confirms this dilemma that students of color experience at the community college. Wood and Williams (2013) provide the most comprehensive analysis of

black males' persistence predictors at the community college. Analyzing data from the Education Longitudinal Study from Black males in public two-year colleges, they find that environmental variables, or circumstances outside of the college, are more predictive of black males' persistence at the community college than background, academic, psychological or institutional variables. Environmental variables include life circumstances, "students' perceptions of lack of money," and familial responsibilities. "Environmental pull" can drag students away from the college, while the support of family and friends can also help students succeed. In fact, when environmental factors are introduced, background variables such as educational goals and high school performance, can explain only 7.3% of the variance in student outcomes. Involvement in some extracurricular activities also negatively predicted persistence. But participation in a non-varsity sport, academic program, and close relationships with professors were all positive predictors of persistence. More generally, literature on social integration reveals a varied relationship between minority students' integration and outcomes. This makes sense, given the apparent incompatibility between the cultural capital of minority students and the educational institution, and the overriding importance of environmental factors. Wood and Williams urge community college professionals to form close relationships with students of color, and help them find the extracurricular activities that will provide them with the social and academic support that they need.

Purnell and Blank (2004) found that the college success course offered at that particular college was only mandatory for full time students. Part time students did not have to take the course, and in fact were discouraged from taking the course. Students who needed specific, one-on-one academic advising were also unable to access the resources because it required

higher levels of cultural capital. According to this study, if the community college is going to change it must give all students the opportunity to acquire the social and cultural capital necessary for successfully navigating America's higher education system.

Conclusion

Community colleges are complicated places where one cultural logic drives the way the college operates, and another cultural logic influences the way some of its most vulnerable students interact with this setting. Oftentimes, researchers misunderstand students' goals, and count their exit towards the attrition rate. Still, many students enter the community college in pursuit of a bachelor's degree. If these students are to succeed, then the two year college must be a site where the social and cultural capital of marginalized students is used as an asset, and the institution has structures in place to bolster students with the academic skill set, support networks, and college know-how that will help them succeed in the community college setting and beyond, as they continue on their path of upward mobility. If community colleges only value and accommodate certain forms of social and cultural capital, then theoretically, they could implicitly promote a culture of poverty, silence students voices, strip them of their agency, and put them "forever in a bind of inequality" (Sablan and Tierney, 2014, p. 154).

The literature has revealed a research agenda that emphasizes an understanding of the "inner workings" (Shaw, et al., 1999, p. 4) of the community college, since there are organizational, programmatic, and cultural differences both between community colleges and within the same community college (Shaw et al., 1999; Bahr, 2012). Such research will illuminate how students are experiencing the community college in wildly different ways. Furthermore, research must account for all the extracurricular forces, such as family life,

employment and encounters with the criminal justice system, which have an effect on students' aspirations and involvement in the community college (Bozick, 2008; Flocks and Tannock, 2003; Wood and Williams, 2013). It must seek to understand, from the student's perspective, why students are making particular decisions about their college involvement and career paths (Bahr, 2011). Research on students in higher education more broadly also teaches us that researching the "experiential core" of college life, keeping in mind both college culture and educational stratification, is imperative (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2013). This is where this research project enters the conversation.

Chapter 2 - Methodology and Summary of Data

In order to gather rich data and work towards deepening our knowledge of community college students experiences, I conducted original, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with students at Midwestern Community College's (MCC) Eastern Campus in the summer and fall semesters of 2016. MCC has several branches located in a large, midwestern city and its surrounding suburbs. In 2013, MCC was highly ranked by the Community College Week Report. Interviews for this project were conducted at MCC's Eastern Campus. Eastern Campus caters to traditional-aged students seeking to attain a bachelor's degree, as it has articulation agreements with four-year colleges across the state and honors programs and extracurricular activities for twenty-somethings. The campus also boasts about its numerous health-related job training programs, which include Nursing, Optical Technology and Sport and Exercise Studies. In Fall 2016, 30.7% of Eastern Campus students were between 20 and 24 years old. 48.2% of the student population is African American, 37.5% were white, 3.2% were Hispanic and 3% were Asian. 71% of students were part time while 29% of students are full time. Between 2011 and 2016, 33% of students who enrolled at any MCC campus had transferred to a four year university.

Interview respondents were selected using a convenience sampling method, with some snowball sampling included. The strength of this sampling method is that it allowed me to interview multiple members of various peer networks. In many interviews, students referenced their friends who were also interviewed. Such a sample allowed for a rich analysis of peer networks. The limitation of this method is that there was not a random chance of interviewing students from the full range of backgrounds represented at MCC, and as a result, there may be

types of student experiences at MCC that are not represented in this study. Quantitative studies should analyze the generalizability of the experiences described here.

All of the interviews were conducted in a campus cafeteria or student lounge. Interviews ranged in length from 35 to 90 minutes long, with the average interview length being 45 minutes. Interview respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and all names used in this thesis are pseudonyms. I have also changed or obscured the names of any potentially-identifying groups or activities.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and transcripts were coded qualitatively. In my analysis, I grounded students' voices in existing theory, while also discovering places where their voices are pushing the boundaries of a larger theoretical understanding of community colleges. Students were asked about: 1) why they came to MCC, 2) expectations for college, 3) personal goals for college, 4) personal strengths and weaknesses, 5) adulthood and its concomitant stressors, 6) support networks and involvement at MCC, 7) broader reflections on their experience in the education system. By allowing themes to emerge from the data through qualitative analysis, I identified four clusters of student experiences at MCC that revolve around different access to and activation of social and cultural capital by students. The four groups that emerged from my analysis are described in the empirical chapters that follow.

In total, 46 students were interviewed. Seventy-eight percent of the respondents were African American and 11% were white. Two Asians/pacific islanders, two international students, and one hispanic student were also interviewed. Fifty-six percent of the respondents were male and 44% were female. The average age of interviewees was 20 years old and students had completed, on average, 2.27 semesters at MCC. Fifty percent of my respondents came to MCC

immediately after graduating high school, 28% attended a four-year university, 17% attended another community college or credential program, and 4.3% worked or took time off between high school graduation and enrollment at MCC. Table 2 shows students' pathways to MCC broken down by student group.

The state government's 2016 State Report Card ranks all of the state's high schools in order of performance. For the rightmost statistic in Table 1, I located each student's high school on the 2016 State Report Card to assess if the high school was in the top third, middle or bottom third of high schools in the state, assigning schools a 1 if they landed in the top third, a 2 if they landed in the middle third, and a 3 if they landed in the bottom third. The average high school rating was 2.2. While this is not a strict measure of socioeconomic status, it does indicate something about the class habitus that the student was previously exposed to in their high school. 91.3% of students went to suburban and/or private schools, while the remaining 8.7% attended school in the city.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Respondents by Student Group

	N	Gender		Race					Avg Age	Avg Sem at MCC	Avg H.S. rating
		M	F	Bl	Wh	As/PI	His	Int'l			
ISL	6	3	3	5	0	1	0	0	20	3.33	1.5
VC	7	4	3	3	1	1	0	2	21	2.43	2.25
FR	16	7	9	12	3	0	1	0	20	2.69	2.27
DBD	17	12	5	16	1	0	0	0	20	2.41	2.64
Total	**46**	**26**	**20**	**36**	**5**	**2**	**1**	**2**			
Average									**20.25**	**2.72**	**2.17**
%		56.5	43.5	78.3	10.9	-	-	-			

Table 2

Pathway to MCC by Student Group

	Immediate entrance to MCC	Transfer from university	Transfer from c.c.	Work or time off	Total
ISL	3	2	1	0	6
VC	2	3	2	0	7
FR	11	2	2	1	16
DBD	7	6	3	1	17
Total	**23**	**13**	**8**	**2**	**46**
%	50	28.2	17.4	4.3	100

Chapter 3 - Involved Student Leaders

Most of the Involved Student Leaders never expected to get involved in campus activities at MCC. Diante, for example, transferred from Big State University to MCC. He came to MCC with the expectation "that I'd just go to class. Not be involved in any activities because it's a community college with less students. You're not going to get involved as much [compared to one's involvement] at a university. And, that's it. Take classes, get good grades, and transfer to a four year." But after having spent two semesters at the college, Diante is an active participant in social and academic organizations on campus. "So now I'm a member of the Leadership Alliance, the Black American Council, I'm working in the President's Office . . . I was in student government for like a week. I didn't like it much, hahaha. And I just applied for the Mandela Academy. So I should be notified if I get that position within a week or two," said Diante. While Diante and his fellow Involved Student Leaders (ISLs) did not expect to immerse themselves in student life at MCC, their socioeconomic backgrounds made them likely candidates for such roles. The ISL experience detailed in this chapter gives insight into 1) the forms of social and cultural capital that MCC as an institution values, and 2) how the community college can be a site where students learn how to leverage their own social and cultural capital.

ISLs are Predisposed to Getting Involved

Of the 46 students interviewed, 13% of them were heavily involved in campus activities. Diante, Mische, Monet, Landon, Jeremiah and Ayesha share some characteristics that make them likely candidates for capitalizing on campus activities. Five of the six hail from the county's most high-performing public high schools, a detail that sets them apart from the other students

who, on average, attended mid-range or poorly performing high schools. These top-performing high schools are predominantly white, and offer a range of honors and Advanced Placement courses and well-resourced extracurricular activities, such as robotics teams or school newspapers. ISLs described themselves as typical high school students in that they had average grades and were involved in a club or two. For example, Diante said that his high school participation in extracurricular activities did not match that of his friends who went on to Ivy League schools, but he was still involved in the chess club and Leukemia Lymphoma Society. ISLs describing such a high school experience as "typical" reveals that they believe participation in at least one club activity to be normal. ISLs come from a reality where students are expected to be active participants in educational institutions, institutionalized extracurricular activities are of value, and it is normal to make use of institutional activities in pursuit of one's own academic and career goals. Such values and skill sets would become a source of embodied cultural capital that ISLs would end up harnessing at MCC. At MCC, the ISL's embodied cultural capital is most distinctive in how they decide to actively invest in relationships with their peers, which helps them to thrive both academically and socially. Another attribute that ISLs share is having connections to the college, which is an indispensable source of social capital. It is not totally coincidental that three of the six ISLs have family members who work at MCC. Family members steer these students' college decisions, as they serve as an information network, source of encouragement, and easy way to get a pulse on campus affairs at MCC. Ayesha, the one ISL who attended a poorly-performing high school, might have had fewer opportunities to develop embodied cultural capital in her high school. However, she was encouraged to get involved at

MCC by her mom, who works on campus. Thus, social capital smoothes out many class distinctions between the ISLs, and puts them on equal footing for college involvement.

Still, the specific extracurriculars, and why they decide to immerse themselves in these activities, reveals exactly how much middle class capital ISLs have, and how they have come to embody such middle class values that, in our society, most easily translate into academic success. Diante, Monet and Mische all have college-educated parents, and Diante and Monet both have family connections at the college. These advantages are reflected in the fact that these three students all took up high-status leadership positions, rather than participant positions, at the college. In addition to holding student jobs at the campus's fitness center, Monet and Mische are president and vice president of the student government. Diante was especially intentional about getting involved in campus activities that would build on his preexisting social and cultural capital. He said:

> I really took an effort, made an effort, to step out of my shell and explore every inch of MCC, from the building to the opportunities that they offer. My mother has a friend downstairs in the career center, and she really showed me, at first, all the opportunities at MCC and how to earn scholarship money that seem hidden from other students. But other students just don't look for those same opportunities, so it seems like there's not much that MCC has to offer. So after getting involved in those scholarships and some other clubs, I was introduced to other people who showed me other avenues I can go down with scholarship money, and more opportunities to show myself as a leader, and I just kept progressing.

Jeremiah, Logan, and Ayesha, on the other hand, are all first generation college students. Their involvement in MCC is not leadership-oriented. But this is not negative, as the way that they choose to engage in the college is still effective in aiding in the achievement of their academic and career goals. Ayesha plays volleyball at MCC, while Logan and Jeremiah both

hold jobs as Student Ambassadors for the college. Jeremiah also works on the fitness center with his fellow ISLs, Mische and Monet.

While Diante made calculated decisions about how plug into MCC, Ayesha decided to join the volleyball team simply because she enjoys the sport. She played varsity volleyball in high school and, after some discussion with her mom, decided that continuing her volleyball career in college would be a fun way to stay active and make friends at MCC. For Ayesha, building a social network at MCC is more about having an emotional support system than it is about having access to power in the institution. Kindred, whom Ayesha met in their Freshman Experience class, has helped her traverse stressful family situations, and even helped her get a part time job at Target. Ayesha's mom, who both worked at the college and was in the process of attaining her bachelor's degree while Ayesha was enrolled at MCC, is encouraging Ayesha to be the first of her siblings to graduate college.

Diante and Ayesha's social mobility paths are different, and as a result, their integration into life at MCC is different. Ayesha's integration into life at MCC is one that allows her to find the interdependence necessary for becoming the first in her family to graduate, while Diante's activities help him climb the social ladder. Regardless of these differences, they are both still drawing from their own sources of social and cultural capital in order to make MCC a place where mobility is possible for them.

MCC Supports ISLs

Involved Student Leaders come to MCC with the social and cultural capital that already inclines them to get integrated into social and academic networks on campus. But there are still

many ways in which the college invests in these students, and helps them become student leaders. More specifically, Sara, at the Office of Student Life, makes student involvement happen. ISLs spoke highly of Sara because of her warm and uplifting personality. Sara was able to get a young man like Jeremiah enthusiastic about involvement at MCC. Jeremiah described himself as a formerly immature teenager who has since matured since being included in student life at MCC:

> [I've learned] not to have a group. I learned not to be a part of a crowd. Everyone in different crowds has strengths and weaknesses. So, when you limit yourself to a group of people, that's when you're going to fail with that group. Either you're going to fail or you're going to succeed. And the route I was going, I was, like, smoking weed and having girlfriends. It was just a big distraction. I was distracted at [the first community college I attended]. Here I'm focused because I'm not doing those things anymore. I actually care about my lifestyle.

What is most important about Jeremiah's story is that Sara was instrumental in adjusting his lifestyle. He said of Sara, "She's just a motivator. She's such a mom figure. She's definitely, don't only care about the work I get done, she cares about my personal life . . . Like, [she asks] are you doing well in school, how can I help you? And if she can't help me, she knows the person who can. She encourages me." Considering that Jeremiah described himself as a distracted student, it would have been easy for MCC to perceive him as a student whose attributes could not positively contribute to the institution or aid in Jeremiah's attainment of his own academic goals. But Sara is instrumental in allowing MCC to be a transformative experience for Jeremiah, by acting as a "mom figure" and creating a sense of family between Jeremiah and other ISLs. Rather than considering his charisma a distraction to other MCC students, Sara is strengthening Jeremiah's ability to connect to fellow peers. For example, in

describing friends he has made at MCC, Jeremiah credits Sarah with helping him make friends and mature in his friendships:

> **Jeremiah:** [My friend Brittany], she's a leader . . . She has a blog called [Keep Moving]. Oh yea, Miles. Good friend, honestly. He's not perfect, I'm not perfect. We bump heads a few times, but we come back together. That's what I like about it. You know, that what real friends are. Where you can bump heads, spend some time apart, and come back and mature together, and continue to grow. So that's it. He's definitely an inspiration.
>
> **Interviewer:** How did you guys become friends?
>
> **Jeremiah:** Sara! Sara, she's my supervisor for student life.

Institutions can also create spaces that promote a shared goal. Such a space at MCC is the Black American Council. By participating as a mentor and mentee in this council, Diante learned that socializing can be beneficial, supportive, and goal-oriented. Like Jeremiah, Diante is a charismatic and energetic African-American young man. The Black American Council challenged Diante to use his sociability to facilitate the accomplishment of academic goals, not undermine them:

> **Interviewer:** So do you feel like your experience here is better now that you have the mentor from the Black American Council, the internship, and people who are supporting you?
>
> **Diante:** Of course. They appeal to my ideas. They motivate me to keep going forward, and they expand my mind to think in different ways that I'm not used to.

MCC taught both Jeremiah and Diante that social and academic integration is both possible and helpful. While Sara and the Black American Council embraced these young men, they also learned how to build up their own strengths. Diante noted that before attending MCC, he was stubborn, did not like to receive advice, and had a general "problem with authority." Now, as a mentee of the Black American Council, he is learning to accept advice and

mentorship. Logan, another ISL, is also excited at the opportunity to use his natural outgoingness

to promote MCC. Logan's face beamed when he said that his favorite part about MCC is

working as a Student Ambassador. This job allows him to use his naturally fun-loving and social

personality to become an active participant in the cultural and social networks at MCC:

> The fun part about this was, during my time here, during the summer semester of
> 2015, which would have been the end of my first year, I got a job as a student
> ambassador. These are people who help people during the new student
> orientation, and they help people upfront with doing their FAFSA and scheduling
> their classes and working with the [administrators] most of the time. I never
> expected to actually get the job, I just signed up and they said, "Hey, come up for
> an interview." I'm like, okay! So it came out of nowhere, and that helped me out.
> So I was working and learning more about MCC while I was here. Like, cool!

Diante, Jeremiah, and Logan teach us that the process of turning a personality trait into

social networks and academic capital is a dynamic one, aided by institutional actors, structures

within the institution, and the students themselves. Bush and Bush (2010) also argue that

community colleges must make sure that their African American male students perceive the

institution and climate being supportive of them. They exhort community colleges to form

mentorship programs so that African American males and faculty can interact, put on campus

programs that include African American males in the school culture, and establish orientation

programs where African American males can voice their needs and concerns. Such activities will

contribute to black males feeling supported by both the institution and campus climate.

Indeed, at MCC, Diante, Jeremiah and Logan are participating in programs that embrace rather

than alienate them. These students are in the process of changing the way they think about the

usefulness of social and cultural capital, and changing their behavior as a result. Jeremiah

revealed this as he discussed the importance of staying active in life at MCC:

> It's important for the simple fact that it not only helps you, it helps the college as
> well. You meet awesome people, and the goal is to network, to definitely build

the right networking skills. Whereas, back at [my old community college] I would build the wrong networking skills . . . So student life, which is where Sara works, gave me an opportunity to work with them. I did an interview, I got the job, and been promoting MCC events ever since.

Making MCC Cool: ISLs Grow Each Other's Capital

Institutional programs and institutional actors such as Sara certainly play a role in developing spaces for students to get to know one another. But it is the students themselves who actively create their own friendships, information networks, and emotional support systems. Students shape the culture of MCC, and are the ones extending and exchanging capital with each other. Mische described this process as making MCC "cool." Mische said that when she first enrolled at MCC, "I was like, oh no, I'm going to Midwestern Community College. And then I just realized that I could make this place – this place could be really cool if I made it cool." Similarly, Ayesha said, "Like, I honestly didn't want to go to community college . . . but then once my mom explained it to me and everything, and how it's the same thing as college, it's just cheaper and more convenient at home, then I just opened my eyes and said, 'Y'know, I'm just gonna do it this way. Who cares what other people say?'" Both Mische and Ayesha were afraid that coming to MCC would mean missing out on the party-centric, Big State University experience. In fact, "fear of missing out" can be considered a feature of swirling through higher education. Swirlers, such as Mische who transferred to MCC from a Big State University, and Ayesha, who is planning to transfer to Big State University, have to manage their expectations about college cultures, and how they are going to experience college at different phases of their journey.

For students who swirl through higher education, making MCC cool is really the work of developing resistant capital. Yosso (2005) defines resistant capital as a form of cultural wealth that "refers to those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenge inequality" (p. 12). Although Yosso's forms of capital identify the strengths of individuals marginalized by race, they are useful for describing the skills that students who are marginalized in the education system need to develop. In the community college setting, developing resistant capital can be a skill that directly relates to achieving academic success. As a result of developing this strength, students like Mische and Ayesha are able to embrace opportunities to connect with fellow peers at MCC. For example, Mische and Jeremiah became friends by working in the fitness center together. They also find ways to make their experience at community college meaningful. Mische enjoys being the Vice President of the student body, and, in that role, acting as a cheerleader for the school. Similarly, Ayesha enjoys her time at MCC because she has learned how to make meaningful connections with peers, navigate college as a first generation student, and sustain her love for volleyball. In short, they see themselves as active contributors to life at MCC, which helps their own success and encourages other students to become active participants in school affairs as well.

Conclusion

ISLs possess an abundance of institution-valued capital, which both predisposes them to campus integration and leads faculty and staff members to see their potential. Consequently, for ISLs, the opportunities to get involved on campus are plentiful. "Yea, it's very, there's so many opportunities and there's so many things and tools here for people to be successful," said Monet.

"And I always say that you come to MCC and they like, they set you up to be successful. They have all these programs like Step Up, Mandela Academy, Trio . . . All those programs are meant to help you succeed where you lack, where you think you lack. They just help you prepare yourself. So I think it's a really great school." Jeremiah also thought that all students who attend MCC are encouraged to get involved. "Because here they tell you – they almost force you to be a part of [social and academic support programs]."

But ISLs are far from monopolizing the resources at MCC or excluding them from low-income and minority students. In fact, all the ISLs were from racial minority groups. These students make MCC a strong institution by bringing high levels of cultural wealth and capital to the college, and helping their peers to continue to develop skills and strategies to navigate college. ISLs actively decide to invest in relationships with their peers, engage in student affairs, and make the most of clubs and organizations. Their well-rounded participation in activities at MCC allows them to thrive both academically and socially. Working in the gym provides students like Mische and Jeremiah with the opportunities to form information networks with each other. Joining the Black American Council gave Diante the opportunity to learn from other African American peers. Ayesha met her best friend in a Freshman Experience class, and they have emotionally supported each other ever since. Logan celebrates his diverse friend group, as he said, "the diversity here is amazing. In the group of friends I have, we have about 7 races and people from [ages] 19 to 33 . . . For example, there's this guy who just graduated, his name was Li Yu. We all just called him Lewis because it was just easier to say. And he would tutor everyone in math . . . But he came over and he would tutor us in precalc and statistics, yea."

In all of these interactions, ISLs are making MCC a more inclusive and democratic institution, and one where students across socioeconomic, racial and ethnic lines can build trust and exchange information that is necessary for postsecondary success. The ISLs' enthusiasm is important for the culture of the school. They enjoy their time at MCC, bring spirit to the school, promote the college, and model what it's like to be a student leader on campus.While they may be small in numbers, the wealth of capital that these students bring to MCC sets the tone for the college and has both instrumental and inspirational benefits for other students.

Chapter 4 - Visiting Collegians

Brayden successfully completed two years at Big State University. He started his time at BSU by participating in a pre-freshman preparation program for minority students. In his first two years at BSU, Brayden learned how to get on the pre-medical track, all while joining a fraternity and integrating himself into the social scene on campus. Brayden considers his experience at BSU to be both academically and socially successful, even though he's had to make some adjustments in how much time he commits to fraternity brothers versus schoolwork. In his sophomore year, Brayden decided to switch his major from neuroscience to psychology. To limit distractions and pick up his general credits and introductory psychology credits as quickly as possible, Brayden decided to spend a semester or two at MCC.

Brayden's use of the higher education system makes him a classic swirler. Swirling has become an increasingly common pattern in higher education. As opposed to taking a linear route through higher education, swirlers transfer between institutions before attaining a degree (Selingo, 2012). Today, student swirl is increasingly popular because students are less "brand loyal" and technology has made it possible for students to choose how they want to receive an education. Students are more inclined to leave an institution for a number of reasons relating to their social life, academic goals, or mental health (Seglio, 2012). In fact, 33% of students who obtain an undergraduate degree transfer during their time in college (Shapiro et al., 2012). With swirling being a feature of how students use the higher education system, it is hardly surprising that some students attend MCC, but do not consider themselves MCC students. At MCC, they are looking for a transactional college experience where they pick up credentials as collegians, rather than get the popularly marketed "college experience."

What Makes a Visiting Collegian

In this thesis, students who use the college as if they belong to an institution of higher education other than MCC are called Visiting Collegians (VCs). Seven of the interviewed students qualify as VCs. Brayden, Makenna, and Shaneez plan to pick up a few credits at MCC before returning to their respective universities. Another VC, Natasha, started her college career at MCC but is a VC because she came into the college with concrete plans to transfer. By taking 21 credit hours every semester, including summer semesters, Natasha will graduate from MCC in under two years. She has already been accepted into two universities, and has a position in a biology lab at the university where she plans to transfer. Because of Natasha's intense commitment to her future college home, she qualifies as a VC. Natasha, by the way, has achieved all of this while being a 21 year old mother and legal caretaker of her ill mother. Carlson is a similarly situated VC in that life circumstances have required that he start his college journey at community college. Because Carlson knew that he would be moving across the country, he started his undergraduate experience at a community college in California, and is continuing to get his associate's degree at MCC. But he has already identified the Midwestern university that he wants to transfer to, and is making connections at that institution. Finally, two VCs are international students. While their experiences as international students will not be discussed in depth, their interaction with the college, along with the forms of academic capital that they bring to the institution, mirrors that of the American visiting collegians.

At first glance, VCs do not look significantly different from other student groups. They went to midrange high schools where they were minimally involved. They average out to be 21

years old, which makes them slightly older than their peers in other groups. But these minor demographic differences accompany a dramatically different experience at the community college. VCs have been able to adapt to the higher education system, and have become efficient and skilled users of it. While ISLs such as Diante and Ayesha are learning and adjusting to higher education, VCs are at the point in their journey where they have clearly defined goals, and know how to use the system to get what they want. This chapter further explores how VCs interact with MCC, and how they contribute to peer networks in this space.

In order to be a skilled user of the higher education system, a student must embody the culture of the American education system, or have ingrained in them the ability to be a "good student," as our education system defines it. Some VCs develop this embodied cultural capital by excelling in high school. Natasha, for example, described herself as the "good [high school student] that got straight A's, basically, and was in every sport. That was me," said Natasha. "I was that overachiever." Because she was an overachiever in high school, working especially hard at MCC while juggling multiple adult responsibilities is not an insurmountable task. Brayden is an African American male who comes from a lower middle class home. His black maleness easily could have worked against him, but Brayden was a hardworking high school student. Brayden's mom enrolled him in a slew of extracurricular activities, ranging from football camp to Saturday Jazz School. Before entering college, Brayden also participated in the pre-freshman summer program for minorities.

Some students acquire the embodied cultural capital of a "good student" by attending community college. Makenna, an African American woman, attended an inner city high school that focuses on visual and performing arts. Makenna disdained her high school, so much so that

she failed her senior year and ended up getting her GED. Makenna first interacted with MCC by attending a GED banquet at the college. There, she learned some new information about the school and was convinced to enroll. At MCC, Makenna learned how to be a good student. Her first experience at MCC was an ISL episode. She was a Student Ambassador, was close friends with Logan (who was discussed in the previous chapter), and was committed to picking up better study skills. It was at MCC where Makenna learned to be the "overachiever" that Natasha became in high school. Within three years, Makenna attained her associate's degree and transferred to Big State University where she majors in theater and is an active participant in both social and academic activities. Makenna was interviewed when she was taking summer classes at MCC in order to make up for some classes she struggled through at BSU. By taking these summer courses, she will stay on track to be the first in her family to graduate college.

Taken together, Natasha, Brayden and Makenna teach us that becoming a good student takes a specific skill set that one has to learn how to embody. These academic skills are a form of embodied cultural capital, as opposed to innate intelligence, that one can acquire by being saturated in academic institutions and programs. Beyond acquiring institution-valued forms of capital, these students of color also have to develop navigational capital. Navigational capital "refers to the skills of maneuvering through school institutions," and especially ones that were not created for communities of color (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Navigational capital allows students to "sustain high levels of achievement, despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly at school and, ultimately, dropping out of school" (Alva, 1991, p. 19 as cited by Yosso, 2005). It is not hard to imagine a first generation student dropping out of community college, a low-income black male not persisting through his premedical track,

or a 21-year old mom submitting to a working class mom status. Natasha, Brayden and Makenna's navigational capital has been essential to their success.

Community College Supports Visiting Collegians

If VCs already have the academic skills necessary to succeed, then why do they decide to come to community college? Even for high-achieving students like themselves, the journey through higher education is difficult and not accommodating of adult responsibilities or personal difficulties. Shaneez described how her experience at Big State University was grueling:

> After you kind of hit rock bottom, and four year colleges, like they'll do that to you. Like you're in so much debt, you're so stressed out. There's so much happening. You just hit rock bottom and you just have to climb out of that hole. And when you're climbing, you just realize how resilient you are, and then you get a whole new sense of self.

Shaneez decided to attend MCC because she needed a space to continue to develop this new "sense of self" while also working through family issues.

Brayden described his decision to attend MCC as the "big kid decision." He realized that if he wanted to make school a priority, and attain his goal of becoming a doctor, then needed to spend time away from his fraternity brothers. This was a humbling but mature decision to make, "because a lot of my friends talk down on [MCC]," said Brayden. "It's like community college. But, I mean, you're learning. You're still learning. Teachers are still very intelligent. And there were a lot of people telling me no I shouldn't do it, and I'm glad I listened to myself and the people telling me I should."

Natasha and Makenna's maturity levels steered them towards MCC. Makenna commented on how she's tired of the immaturity of her peers at Big State University, and said of

herself, "even though I'm only 23, I act like I'm 40 sometimes." Natasha also discussed her own

maturity level, and how it has played into her decisions regarding higher education. ". . .but I do

wish that I acted my age. I'm 21. But then again, I really don't. I'm not missing out on anything

extreme. Plus, like, I'm on the right path."

MCC is also helpful for VCs because they find it easier to navigate than a big, state

university. Shaneez discussed the differences between Big State University and MCC:

> [At Big State University] you kind of [had] too much freedom. The school's a
> little too big. Class sizes were too big. You go to a lecture hall, and there's a few
> hundred kids, you're never gonna be able to get the help you need individually.
> So you really would get no help. You could email [professors], but maybe they
> would respond to you. It's you and four hundred other people.

For a student like Shaneez, who is already academically oriented and wants to receive the best

academic experience possible, a community college offered more opportunities for

individualized learning than a state school. Natasha also appreciates MCC because it offers a lot

of academic resources and allows her to succeed "without the pressure" that she associates with

larger universities. At MCC, Natasha finds herself able to get the individualized attention that

she wants from an education program. Brandon also appreciates the smaller setting, which

allows him to get more invested in his classes:

> When I first came here, I thought it was super, super easy. I thought I wasn't
> going to like it. But later throughout the semester, it started to pick up and got a
> little more difficult. And, I mean, I like it. I really enjoy it. Because it's a different
> feel to me. I don't exactly know how to describe it. This feels more like a
> *community* college. [Big State University] was – one of the downfalls of it being
> such a big school is that it was easy to get lost in the classes. Like even the quote
> unquote small classes could be fifty students in a small class. Now, I come here
> and it's like twenty kids in a classroom. It's a lot more personable. I actually like
> it.

Visiting Collegians Help MCC Students Gain Academic Capital

Because of their strong academic skills and navigational savvy, VCs are a great asset to the community college. Their academic capital is so embodied that their mere presence models for other students how to be a college student. Natasha, for example, models the value of setting boundaries to maintain focus. She discussed how she uses MCC as a space to be studious even though there are a lot of legitimate family matters that could tug at her while she's on campus: "When I'm at school, I tend, I really try to keep everything that's outside of school, like, there, and not here. I try not to enter with it when I come into a classroom because if I start thinking about other things – and obviously I sometimes have to do stuff like call [my mom's] doctor or talk to the nurse or order prescriptions – but, I try to keep it to a minimum." Indeed, when I approached Natasha for an interview, she had her books and study notes spread across a table in a common room and was using her various colored pens to study for an exam. Students like Natasha, who have high levels of academic capital, are often motivated to share this capital with other students. She discussed how she formed a working relationship with peers in her biology class:

> I was in my first semester here last fall. I was in Biology [101] and there was a group of, like six girls. We all sat in the [front row]. No one knew each other. By the end of the semester, we all became really, really close, and to this day I'm taking classes with some of them . . . there were a couple of guys that sat behind us and we would all study together and everything. But the girls, we got really close because we were all majoring in Biology and that was a tough course, Bio [101] . . . I wish every course I took was like that. I mean, I've taken courses where I would sit there the whole semester by someone that wouldn't say a word, you know, and you don't really interact with people, I feel like you would get less of a chance to succeed and get what you want out of that course . . . versus a course where everyone's engaged and helping each other out.

Forming study groups takes several willing students, but academically-motivated students like Natasha play a valuable role in making these groups beneficial.

Conclusion

As swirling through higher education becomes an increasingly common pattern, and getting through college requires more interdependence and a greater ability to manage uncertainty than it did in previous eras (Settersten et al., 2015), completing a postsecondary degree requires the skills and navigational capital exemplified by Visiting Collegians. VCs know how to get in and out of the community college having achieved their goal, while also feeling like they belong to another institution. Their ability to pool resources and support from multiple institutions is essential to their postsecondary success. Their other institutions give them important opportunities, such as Brandon's bridges program and Nora's lab experience which are the opportunities they need in order to achieve their academic and career goals. But these institutions do not offer what a community college can offer. As a result of community colleges offering smaller class sizes, more responsive professors, and less social obligations than four year schools, VCs can develop the social and aspirational capital necessary for succeeding in college today.

VCs also decide to spend a semester at MCC because they appreciate the ethos of grit and aspiration. "I feel like it's a really intense – people here are really driven, you know?" commented Shaneez. She continued,

> At the four years, sometimes people are just there to party. No one's here to party. We're here to get it done. So, and I feel like right now, in my lifestyle right now I'm kind of just here to get it done. So I fit in in that respect. I have the same mindset as a lot of people do right now. And I haven't always been that way, but you know.

But someone could be just as smart, motivated, and mature as a VC and not have the same experience that Shaneez is having. Shaneez is having a successful experience at MCC because

she already developed the cultural capital and skill sets necessary for postsecondary success. Thus, even though VCs share their peers' grit and aspiration, they get more out of the college.

It would be easy to allow the community college to become a stratified system where only Visiting Collegians succeed and less academically prepared students flounder. But it is also possible, and necessary, for the community college to become a place where students have the opportunity to form strong bonds and support networks with each other. Shaneez stated MCC already has a spirit of perseverance that encouraged her. Natasha also said that she enjoys the college most when her peers are all engaged in the classroom, and she has the opportunity to build study skills with them. Makenna's story also reminds us that bringing together students from multiple backgrounds really matters. Makenna was a student who received her GED, started college as an involved student leader at MCC, and transferred to Big State University, but is back at MCC for the summer in order to pick up some credits. If community colleges are to be their strongest, they need to be the place where students like Makenna, as a GED recipient and BSU collegiate, are able to draw both inspirational and instrumental benefits from their peers.

Chapter 5 - Free Riders

Among the students I interviewed, sixteen fit a pattern I call Free Riders. Perhaps the students that receive the most "value-added" from peer networks are the Free Riders. Free Riders are not directly immersed in student affairs like Involved Student Leaders, nor are they as intense students as Visiting Collegians. But they draw a lot of inspiration from the students who are involved, and learn how to be good students by looking up to their most diligent peers. Free Riders possess characteristics that allow them to benefit from the MCC environment. They come from decent k-12 districts, and the majority of them (11 of 16) entered MCC the fall semester after graduating high school. The majority of Free Riders were not involved in high school activities, and eked out average grades. But these students come from stable family situations and have both a habitus and social support that allowed them to persist through high school and move onward to college. These characteristics matter because there are other students (described in Chapter 6) who come from educational backgrounds that have not prepared them academically or socially for the rigors of even the most foundational college education. In the community college setting, Free Riders have a significant advantage over other students who encounter many disruptions in their pursuit of a postsecondary degree.

Free Riders have connections with ISLs that prove to be a useful source of knowledge, or information network. Based on interviews with urban community college students, Karp et al., (2010) define information networks "as social ties that facilitate the transfer of institutional knowledge and procedures" (p. 75). Students feel integrated into a college not merely when they see a familiar face in the hallway, but when they can ask a peer or professor about services and resources at the college that can help them better navigate the college. Many scholars

(Deil-Amen, 2011; Maxwell, 2000; Mertes, 2015) also theorize that the most effective form of integration on community college campuses is that which is both social and academic in nature, and centers around students "sharing their studies" (p. 210). Classic information networks exist at MCC, as in the case of Mike learning about a physical education course through MCC's student body vice president, Mische:

> Actually, through my friend, um, Mische told me about [the backpacking class]. She's the one who kinda got me into it. And then she knows about it because she literally knows like everything here and she's like the class vice president now. But yea, she was kinda like, "[Mike], do you need another P.E. credit, 'cause you should totally sign up for this." And I was like, "well I don't really need it," but it just sounded so cool that I wanted to do it.

Mike further described his relationship with Mische, explaining that they took a course together. "We were in Physics [101] together last semester, and, kinda started out like 'Oh my God, I don't know what's going on in this class' together, and we started studying, like we hung out, you know. Now I've known her for almost a year now," said Mike. Free Riders who have an even weaker connection to Mische still benefit from knowing her. "Uh, I know Mische. She's very, very involved," said Ally. "Yeah she's very involved with academics. So I look up to people who are very scholarly and involved in their school, because then that makes me want to be involved, it makes me want to, you know, be on their level." At the time of the interview, Ally was not involved in any programs at MCC, but her connection to Mische nonetheless keeps her engaged in the school. Mike stays engaged in the school in the same way.

Free Riders also learn from the resistant capital that the students of color, and especially those whose who are Involved Student Leaders, bring to MCC. Mike is a white student who comes from a predominantly white high school. He appreciates being in what he considers to be a diverse school environment and learning to socialize with people from different backgrounds.

Even though he did not discuss any close friendships he developed at the school, Mike discussed how he appreciates the social climate of MCC:

> I've always considered myself a kinda awkward guy. But, you know, people are cool here. And it's a really nice school and everything like that, so it's really culturable here, lots of cool people here. Um, my favorite aspects . . . honestly just the accepting environment here. 'Cause it's, you know there's always a huge transition from high school to college, but just one of the cool things that I've seen from that transition is there's so many different backgrounds and types of people in high school and then when you go to college literally you could be friends with everyone. It just seems, I don't know, I don't really know what changed, but just, we all get along real cool. So that's one of the coolest things.

Thus, resistant capital plays an important role in enriching the experience that white students such as Mike have at MCC.

The social climate of MCC also encourages Javon, an African American student who transferred from Big State University after an injury caused him to lose his football scholarship. Being in his third semester at MCC, he said "What encouraged me? The fact that everybody here is okay," said Javon. Parting with his dream of becoming a football player initially devastated Javon. But at MCC, he has learned to prioritize academics over sports, and embrace a new career goal of becoming a sports journalist. Javon's older, college-graduated sister encouraged him to reconsider his career path, but it was at MCC where Javon was able to heed that advice. When Javon said, "everybody's okay here," he meant that the MCC environment is conducive to his success, and his diligent peers encourage him. "Like, when I first got here I thought it was going to be a bunch of fighting and arguing and all that. So I was kind of like, alright well I don't want to go, but I have to. But since I've been here, I've only seen one fight, literally. And other than that, it's been open arms, really," said Javon. "All the teachers have been comfortable with me, I had no arguments with anyone, and that's surprising, because I have anger issues a little bit. It's

just been really comfortable." Javon's experience at MCC illustrates how his fellow peers shape the culture of the school, which helps Javon and students like him meet their potential rather than fall into bad habits.

Free Riders also benefit from resources that MCC offers its students. Bria described how the career assessment test helped her start her path at MCC. She originally wanted to go into veterinary technology, but changed her mind after taking the career assessment:

> And they made me take an assessment. And it kind of showed that I like to be around people. Because, like I said, I like to talk to help, I like to help. So, like I said, that will be a good thing to start. Me going [into] vet tech would be eight years. So I kind of put that on hold. Because I need to be stable now. So I chose to do something else that was kind of, instead of with animals, it's humans. I still get that interaction and stuff, it's just not exactly what I wanted to do. So I'm doing physical therapy assisting.

Free Riders are able to benefit from attending MCC while not being immersed in extracurricular activities, in part, because of their private support networks. "My dad helped out like looking for colleges and stuff like that. We did visits everywhere, and then we kinda decided that this would be a good place to start, 'cause of how cheap it is, too," said Nate. "And I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted to do. So I didn't want to just go, you know, full fledged straight to a university without knowing really a major yet." Mike's private support network, his parents, were a tremendous aid in Mike's decision-making process about colleges and majors. He is studying engineering because his father is an engineer. But Mike was originally thinking about entering the military because he didn't like school. His parents, coupled with the peer network he has at school, are allowing Mike to become more academically oriented.

Ally's parents also helped her make decisions about college and careers. Ally really wanted to go into acting, but she decided not to because her parents encouraged her to choose a

job that would afford her more security. "I just got shut down by my parents to not do it, so that's another reason why I think why I'm just staying in occupational therapy because I know that's going to give me a salary," said Ally. Her parents are the voice of reason, moderating her aspirations in a way that seems to works in her favor.

Conclusion

Free Riders are proud to be at MCC. They try to be good students, mostly by modeling the attitudes and work ethic of Involved Student Leaders and Visiting Collegians. But they do not exchange cultural capital with each other or build up other students' academic experience in the same way that ISLs and VCs do. Their relationships with their peers are not strong enough to allow such a process to occur. Thus, they are passive consumers of the benefits of MCC. Free Riders are impressive in that they find ways to get through college even if they do not like school (and many of them do not). MCC certainly is an environment that makes it easier for them to endure higher education because of the resources offered by the college, along with the peers who encourage them to take advantage of those resources and opportunities.

Chapter 6 - Determined but Disconnected

"I'm taking more and more ownership of it everyday," said Jay. After encountering both financial troubles and a distracting social environment at Big State University, Jay transferred to MCC. In his second semester here, he is striving to take ownership of his education. "[Before] I was really just going through the motion. Like that high school mentality of 'I know what to do to at least get a C.' Now it's like, what I gotta do to get an A."

Jay's determination to learn from his mistakes, become a better student, and realize his academic and career goals echoes the spirit of his fellow Determined but Disconnected students (DBDs). DBDs, who comprise 40% of the respondent pool, are just as determined and just as grateful to be at MCC as any other student. But their experience at MCC is shaped by their striving to overcome barriers that they have encountered while navigating the k-12 and postsecondary education systems. DBDs come from high schools that averaged out to a rating of 2.64, meaning that their schools ranked mostly in the bottom third of the state's 2016 school district ratings. Such metropolitan schools in the state, with a predominantly low-income, African American student population, are riddled with the issues that plague overcrowded and under-resourced urban school districts. Of the 17 DBDs, 16 are African American and 12 are African American males. These individuals had to learn how to navigate a racist education system, and they bring this experience and navigational skill set with them to MCC.

Seven DBDs came to MCC immediately after graduating, six students transferred into MCC from a four year university, three students transferred from another community college, and one student took a gap year between high school and college. DBDs were, on average, 20 years old at the time of the interview and in their third semester at MCC. Phoebe is an anomaly

in this group in that she was the only white respondent. The significance of her falling into the Determined but Disconnected category will be discussed at the end of the chapter.

Why is it the case that DBDs are just as determined as other MCC students, but find themselves disconnected from campus resources, peer networks, and social and academic support systems at MCC? One might argue that DBDs simply have more difficult lives, making it hard for them to do well in school. However, many community college students described in this study have adult responsibilities and time-consuming personal lives that could pull them away from school. At 21 years old, Mische, an Involved Student Leader, lives in her own apartment, works a part-time job outside of the college, and regularly fulfills obligations for her parents. Natasha, a Visiting Collegian, is a 21 year old mother and legal caretaker of her ill mother. Marcus, a Free Rider, works a part-time night shift in order to meet his own financial needs. Yet all of these students are integrated into the school, albeit to varying degrees, and find ways to be academically successful. But even if it is the case that DBDs have more burdensome personal lives beset by financial and relational hardships, the argument I advance is that forms of social and cultural capital they possess are less likely to be valued by postsecondary institutions. This mismatch in capital dramatically shapes the way they experience MCC, and points them towards less prosperous academic and career trajectories. This chapter further explores 1) the strengths and limitations of the forms of capital that DBDs use to navigate MCC, and 2) how the institution falls short in reaching out to these students.

DBDs' Social Capital is Self-Defeating

For the majority of DBDs, being in college is a tremendous accomplishment in and of itself. Their college enrollment is a status that proves to themselves and others in their community that they are indeed hardworking, and possess some of the respectable attributes necessary for securing their slice of the American pie. Darren, for example, spoke of how proud he is to attend MCC:

> Being in college is big for me. Honestly, too many people in my family don't go to college, and I'm on the right path, like, I'm on the right path, so I'm not doing nothing with myself, I'm on the right path. Even if I failed at Big State University, like right now when I came back, I got right back in school. Like, I'm gonna make sure that I'm always in school and stuff. As long as, you know, I can.

Similarly, Will went to another suburban community college immediately after graduating high school. But he fell short of attaining a credential, as he decided to move to Georgia to be with his girlfriend. Now, Will is back in the Midwest and studying Pharmacy Technology at MCC, because he heard that pharma-tech is a secure and lucrative industry to go into. While Will regrets some of the decisions he has made about his personal life and career path, he is proud that he is still in school. "I could be somewhere else," said Will. "So, being here, you know what I'm saying, getting the education, it's been a minute, but it's cool."

Not unlike other students, DBDs choose a career path based on the knowledge that they collect from their family, friends, and personal experience in the education system. Kendrick's route through higher education exemplifies this point. After graduating high school, Kendrick took a gap year. During that time, he realized that he was missing out on a collegiate experience that he had the potential to be quite good at. "Cause my friends would always just talk about school and I'll be like, 'I kinda wanna go,' but it be too late," said Kendrick. "[I had] rest, extra

sleep, extra free time. But I [did] miss homework and schoolwork. I was one of the few kids who liked homework."

After his year off, Kendrick enrolled at MCC and decided that he would become the first of his four brothers to graduate college. He devised a strategic plan for attaining his bachelor's degree and becoming a football coach. Kendrick plans to take class year-round at MCC, transfer to either Big State University or Small State University, major in psychology, and get an internship with a college football team. Kendrick developed these plans by researching how the Chief Strategy Officer of his favorite football team got his job. "And I just wanted to have the smarts like DePodesta because he, uh, because he never played football or coached football, well I think he played football, he never coached football, he played baseball, and he somehow got the smarts to build a football team. So I need the smarts from Psychology that he got." Kendrick and many others devise their college and career plans on their own, reminding themselves that they are sharp, enterprising individuals capable of succeeding. The community college offers a space where they can believe that they possess the qualities necessary for making it in life.

Indeed, as MacLeod's ethnographic work revealed (1995), perceptions of opportunity can have a large impact on how black youth think about their own aspirations and persistence. Nielson (2015) also emphasized this message in her analysis of why low-income community college women stay in college for over 3.5 years. Her empirical study of aspirations revealed that cultural forces push students to "hold steady" to academic aspirations. In our college-for-all culture, attending college is perceived as mainstream and widely enjoyable, and thus attending community college allows individuals to partake in this American experience. Furthermore, it can give students a sense of self and social worth, as society attaches some moral value to

educational success. As a result, low-income women persist through community college not only for the purposes of "pragmatic job seeking," but for "moral self-improvement" (Nielson, 2015, p. 88). Neilson calls these combined reasons for staying in community college the "ambition imperative." The institutional structure of the community college, including its open-access policy and vocational training programs, encourages students to embrace the ambition imperative. The institution can mediate aspirations in way that gives students a sense of hope and self worth that can be translated into educational and economic success simply by following the college's pathway.

For many DBDs, pre-existing social capital serves as an essential source of financial and emotional support that allows them to persist at MCC. For example, Jay's social networks make it possible for him overcome his history of a racialized experience in the education system. Jay went to a metropolitan public high school that is celebrated for training low-income and African American students to gain acceptance into selective universities. But when he entered Big State University as an 18 year old African American male, he encountered an onslaught of financial, social, and academic issues. After spending less than a year at BSU, he got entangled with the criminal justice system, and was forced to return home. Jay, however, regrets his decisions. His renewed investment in his own academic outcome, as well as concern for the wellbeing of his friends who are not enrolled in college, encourages him to stay focused at MCC:

> Now I know what I want to do for four years. No more partying, like it's not missing out on anything. Just focus. It's like, I was telling my friends who play sports that if you take care of what you gotta take care of first, it'll all fall in place, like, people and competition, it's, especially for sports, like, how many times we see talented athletes whose grades are crap.

His friends also allow him to take ownership of his education at MCC by relieving burdens in other areas of his life. "Despite my money situation, me and my friends can motivate each other and just seeing what happens," said Jay. "'Cause like whenever things go bad, we find a way to get through it. [Like when] my first car broke down but I didn't get discouraged, kept working, got another car."

But ultimately, Jay's social network is a double-edged sword. Jay believes that his friends are a great source of support and encouragement, so much so that he doesn't see any barriers to succeeding at MCC. "Uh, besides my mom [supporting me], and just trying to be an example to my friends and us being examples to each other, no one's stopping me here," he said. While his friends are helping him stay afloat, his reliance on them is hindering him from developing new social networks at MCC; unlike some of the peers he might build connections with at MCC, Jay's friends are not in the position to help him build up the middle class cultural capital that is necessary for navigating higher education. Whereas the Black American Council helped Diante, an ISL, overcome his "problem with authority" and plug into resources at the college, Jay's friendships cannot turn his work ethic and will to succeed into academic achievement.

Corey's social capital also functions in this doubled-edged way. After graduating high school, two of his friends encouraged him to attend an out-of-state community college with them. Their goal was to improve their basketball skills, get a highlight video, and then transfer to a four year college. Corey stayed with his friends for a year before deciding to move back home. He recognizes that his friends have contributed to his academic success by boosting his confidence and encouraging him to stay in school. But he also realizes that he needs to develop

stronger academic skills and the cultural capital necessary to persist through, and eventually graduate, college:

> Well at [Detroit], it was a small school. It was me, I had two other people from [home], and for some reason, everybody likes us. We was the coolest people in the school. To us, it seemed like [Detroit] people was corny, weird. And they just thought we was the coolest people. They always wanted to be around us, was always talking about us. All the girls, everybody. I mean, that was a big confidence booster. But I mean I always had confidence. I just think I need to build on it [through] public speaking, just being able to talk to any crowd without them looking at me weird. For instance, white people. I might talk to them different than I talk to my friends.

In being an invaluable source of confidence, Corey's friends exert a strong influence on how he is developing his academic and career goals, navigating higher education, and growing into adulthood. His friends helped him move out of the state, play basketball, and enjoy school. They did the work of helping him transcend his circumstances, but they cannot help him develop the middle class capital that will help him to talk to white people and make academic-oriented relationships at MCC.

Jay and Corey's stories reveal that DBDs' forms of social capital are markedly different sources of help, compared to the social and cultural capital of other students. Involved Student Leaders and Visiting Collegians use their own embodied cultural capital and social connections within the institution to seize opportunities at MCC. Free Riders have less institution-valued forms of social and cultural capital, but they are able to develop beneficial connections with well-resourced peers. But for DBDs, there is no peer or institutional program to bridge the gap between their own grit and the academic and social support systems that lead to postsecondary success. In other words, they are attempting to become diligent college students, but their

disconnect from peer networks on campus is impeding them from receiving benefits that connected students are receiving on campus.

DBDs' Cultural Capital is Self-Defeating

Many DBDs are from working class backgrounds. Working class communities tend to hold the ability to be self-reliant in high esteem (Silva, 2013), and practice deference to institutions rather than assertive interaction with them (Lareau, 2011). Lareau argues that middle class parents demonstrate for their children how to demand individualized attention from institutions. As a result, these parents cultivate in their kids a sense of entitlement. Working class parents, on the other hand, do not initiate assertive interactions with institutions, and urge their kids to submit to institutional rules, which causes kids to develop a sense of constraint. Ultimately, then, DBD students' reluctance to use MCC resources is a self-preservation strategy that many students have used for a long time. Tiara, for example, described how she has kept to herself in order to get through school. When describing her high school experience, she said: "[My high school] is a school where they don't talk about colleges, they just talk about basketball and tennis shoes. I was nothing like [my high school]. I wasn't social with any of them. I kept to myself ever since I was in middle school." When describing her MCC experience, Tiara continued,

> I just feel like I like to keep to myself. I will make friends – I'm not the type of person where I be mean. I'm really just focused right now. I have so much more going on in life. I don't have time to sit here at school. I mean I understand what school is for, but honestly, I don't give a fuck about school. I'm here to get my education, that's it. No more, no less.

Similarly, Sydney, who is in her first semester at MCC, explained that the best strategy for academic success is to stay focused. "Some of my fears is basically I would say not getting my bachelor's . . . Because it might be hard, I just want to stay focused, basically. Or something might happen." For Sharon, the ideal college experience is, "just coming, graduating, leaving." There are many resources on campus that could help people like Sharon and Tiara, who are both young parents of small children, and Sydney, a first generation college student. But Sharon, Tiara, and Sydney have learned that "keeping to yourself" is the best way to get through school. Therefore, acquiring institution-valued forms of cultural capital, connecting to social networks on campus, and learning to use newly acquired capital and available resources are especially difficult tasks for them. Their lack of connection to peer networks on campus means that they are having a tough time in college, and they have an especially difficult time juggling adult responsibilities with student responsibilities.

Jay, Corey and Kendrick are also reluctant to take full advantage of resources at MCC or confide in staff members or peers with personal problems. Jay, for example, is enrolled in MCC's Access program. Access provides low-income students with personal tutoring, a monthly bus pass, a monthly Wal-Mart gift card, and other support systems, in order to help them transfer to a four year college or university. While Jay enjoys participating in Access, he is afraid to tell his advisor that hunting for jobs is a big stressor that is causing him to fall behind in school. When asked why he is hesitant to tell his Access advisor for help with finding a job, Jay said,

> I mean, I don't know. I'm the type of person where I feel like I gotta handle it on my own. I'm only worried about the name that's on the paycheck. . . . Like, I haven't even told anybody that I quit my job because people I mess with, the situation I'm trying to get out of . . . 'cause if I wasn't here, I'd have to do it by myself anyways, right?

Jay is also reluctant to get a job on campus because he is unsure where the money will go. "Yea, I understand that, that's cool, but like, I feel that that money's put towards financial aid or something, and I need that money." Kendrick is also skeptical about the forms of support that MCC can offer. He learned about the Access program when he first arrived at the school. But he decided not to enroll because he is confident that he does not need the extra support system to attain his associate's degree. "I don't need the support," said Kendrick. Corey is looking for a source of support, but also has reservations about the support that MCC offers. When asked why he doesn't reach out to staff members at the MCC, Corey said, "My family situation is not the best. I'm just maintaining . . . I just want my life to get better. I'm actually looking for a job right now. I'm struggling trying to get one. Just my basketball situation, I have the injury right now. I'm trying to get a scholarship. I just need some support in my life, so yea."

Then how is MCC supporting these students? As a result of their class habitus, students do not take up the support of structured, institutionalized programs on campus, but encouraging professors can help students clarify their goals, and give them the confidence and support that they need to do well in college. A professor informed Sharon that she should study nursing instead of social work because a nursing wage will help her achieve her goal of providing a stable life for her children. Jay's Business Entrepreneurship professor taught him that he can turn his love of weed into a profitable business, and as a result, Jay wants to open a dispensary. Corey summarized what he believes MCC can and cannot do for him:

> To be honest, [MCC] probably can't do anything except help me in school. I mean right now, my biology teacher is probably the best teacher I had for science classes and all. Like in my whole life. Because he actually – some teachers rush to get the lesson over, but this teacher, he falls behind a lot because he makes sure everybody in the class explains it. He makes sure everybody in the class understands everything. He'll take like 15 questions before he goes to the next

> slide. And it's really – when he does that, it's really hard for anybody to fail his class. He really cares about his students.

Corey's biology professor has established a level of respect and trust from Corey, by proving he is wholly invested in the success of his students. Indeed, based on their survey of African American men in community colleges, Wood and Williams (2013) recommend that college professionals who are well-experienced at connecting with black men should help them find the extracurricular activities that will provide them with the social and academic support that they need. Professors are a meaningful point of contact with the institution. They help students reevaluate their goals and aspirations, and turn their own forms of cultural capital, such as grit and independence, into academic capital. Even though DBDs find this connection to the college to be helpful, it is not meaningful enough to allow them to have the general expectation that MCC programs and personnel are trustworthy or resourceful.

Sharon said that she decided to go to community college because she wanted a better life for her and her daughters. She said, "I didn't want to struggle, basically." Perhaps MCC is most helpful for these students in helping them achieve their primary goal of just not struggling. Being enrolled in college distinguishes DBDs from their friends and family members who, for whatever reason, are not motivated to enroll in college or are sustaining themselves from the underground economy. That is why being in college is their proudest accomplishment, as enrolling in college already holds a high status in their communities. But college enrollment is also a significant burden on these students, when they discover that their existing forms of social and cultural capital that helped them navigate the k-12 system do not help them in this new setting. The result is that DBDs are overconfident and under-supported. Jordan's thoughts about school best summarize the perspective of a Determined but Disconnected student:

Jordan: I mean, got to put in effort to find what you need to know. I'm the type of person who won't give up until I figure out what I need to do or just accomplish my goal I put forth. That's what you need to do, you can't give up in this school, I'm telling you, you really can't. That's why a lot of people drop out.

Interviewer: Because they give up?

Jordan: Yeah they can't put forth the effort.

Jordan: . . . I'm not someone who's struggling.

Interviewer: Gotcha. Is college for you?

Jordan: Yeah. I mean, I don't have a choice.

Jordan: I would still come to college because it gives me a proper education, and proper knowledge. And it also improves your skills in a lot of different things. They are pretty good for helping me to enhance my skills and fulfills . . . for instance, taking public speaking, that can help me become a better speaker. I'm not a good speaker at all, talking to people . . .

Phoebe's Story

Phoebe differs from other Determined but Disconnected students in that she comes from a different class habitus. Her mother is a nurse and her father is a public school teacher who attempted to instill in her the importance of school. She also attended an all-girls private high school that offers a better education than the urban public schools that most other DBDs attended. Furthermore, Phoebe is heavily reliant on her parents' financial support. At the time of the interview, she said that her biggest stressor was not being able to visit her friend in Cancun because her father refused to pay for the trip. Phoebe revealed her class habitus when she said, "I'm over living like a college student." She assumes a college student is someone who is irresponsible and does not use their time or resources wisely. Other DBDs never revealed that they think of themselves as college students, and in fact are striving to become people who are

both responsible adults and students. Phoebe's class habitus is also one that propels her to have a middle class career rather than find a job that will allow her to not "struggle," which is how Sharon defined her aspirations. Phoebe, on the other hand, said, "I want a career, like I'm just, I have no idea what I want to do. I'm scattered all over the place – like do I wanna do tv and film, marketing, sociology, do I wanna become a nurse, social worker, like, I wanna be comfortable in the end, you know?"

Regardless of these differences, Phoebe is a Determined but Disconnected student in that she does not have the skill sets necessary for successfully maneuvering higher education. Phoebe entered Big State University without much direction or inspiration to do well. She said that when she arrived at BSU, "I just put down, like, advertising [as a major], but like I wasn't ready [for college.]" Her time at BSU was spent relying on friends who did help her clarify her goals or focus on academics:

> Um, so like, first semester, I, I was very, I would say I was very codependent on all the people for fun and so I latched on this girl named [Bridgette] and she was wild. Wild. And I'm very, I was very disappointed about school but I still fucked up and I could've done very well and we did a lot of things and I remember . . . still have pictures and all going back, but that was first semester, did some ratchet shit.

Her experience in higher education also resembles that of other DBDs because she is struggling to make it through MCC as a result of not being plugged into the academic resources on campus. "Like I know, I pass by the Transfer Center everyday and I'm like I should probably go, but, or I can get the fuck out of here," she said. In fact, she does not think that MCC can help her truly achieve her goals. "I don't think [MCC can help]. MCC is great, but it's not that to me. I have to hook up with that effort in my universe, like, *I* have to do it." She also has had a difficult time

integrating into social life. "I came [to MCC] fall 2014, like it was like oof, a whammy going from people around you to be like very isolated," said Phoebe. "And then, I dunno, I slipped into a deep depression about a year and a half and was continuing to last, but I knew I had to pull my boot strings up and get a hold of it." In the spirit of a DBD, she would rather rely on her own ingenuity in order to get through college. "Who else is going to believe in me? I'm my number one fan, I'm my number one supporter, it's my life," she said. After her time at BSU, she had decided that she does not need the peer networks to get through college. She said that her advice to fellow college students is "Don't use [friends] as a crutch, use yourself."

Phoebe's experience exhibits the importance of Bourdieu's concept of habitus as a system that mediates between structure and agency, and allows for a theory of class reproduction that is not strictly deterministic. Bourdieu argues that habitus provides "conditioned and conditional freedom [that] is as remote from creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from simple mechanical reproduction of the condition" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 55). Even with her advantageous financial support, private education, and college-educated parents, Phoebe's habitus does not allow her to activate the forms of cultural capital that are valued by MCC. Furthermore, her social isolation from other MCC students keeps her from participating in the lateral transfer of cultural capital between peers that might incline her to leverage the symbolic resources that she brings to the field. Phoebe's experience as a Determined but Disconnected student in higher education reveals that even financial support, private education, and college-educated parents cannot make up for a student not possessing institution-valued forms of cultural capital.

Conclusion

In short, DBDs are working their hardest to be individuals of integrity and fortitude, and people who use the education system to secure a good life. To achieve their goals, they bolster their confidence in order to remind themselves that they have the ability to do well academically, and keep to themselves in order to block out distractions. This rationale that getting socially involved in the college will only distract you is a logical one for students who do not have access to the dominant cultural capital to know what to expect from college. Instead, they find other ways to get through college, such as leaning on support systems outside of college, or relying on their own ability. Determined but Disconnected students reveal that sheer grit or perseverance may help students stay in school, but it is unlikely to help them graduate. If students are to graduate from community college, then it is imperative that the colleges extend students' preexisting forms of social and cultural capital into strategies for college success, rather than leaving students to lean on their own strength.

Conclusion

This thesis gave a thorough account of four different student experiences at the sub-baccalaureate level of higher education. These students' narratives illustrate the ways in which social and cultural capital operate to shape students' aspirations, overcome barriers they may face, and allow them to either integrate or stay on the peripheries of social and academic life at MCC. Most interestingly, this thesis sheds light on the ways in which information and cultural capital flows laterally, or between peers. Peers act as an indispensable source of resource-building and -sharing for each other. Ayesha, an Involved Student Leader, is a first generation college student who has been accepted into Big State University. She is poised to transfer because her involvement in the volleyball team integrated her into social life at MCC, and the relationship that she developed with a friend in her Freshman Experience class served as a source of emotional, financial and academic support throughout her time at MCC. Natasha, a Visiting Collegian, shared her study skills with a group of women in her first biology class at MCC. It was also one of her classmates who told her about opportunities to work in a lab at a nearby university. As a result, Natasha is already a lab research assistant at that university, and will transfer there in a semester. Javon, a Free Rider, said MCC's studious and accepting environment is helping him concentrate on his academics, and embrace a career in sports journalism, rather than hold on to his old dreams of becoming a professional football player. Javon is not not well integrated into academic or social life at MCC, but his peers' involvement weighs heavily on the reformation of his aspirations and his striving to acquire new forms of institution-valued cultural capital.

In stark comparison to the three aforementioned peer groups, Determined but Disconnected students are at severe disadvantage because they do not connect with their peers in ways that help them build social and cultural capital. Jay, a Determined but Disconnected student, is falling behind in his classwork because he cannot find a job, does not know how financial aid or campus jobs work, and does not fully understand how to achieve his career goal of owning a dispensary. Certainly, in the same way that it worked for Javon, even a loose connection to peer networks and peer culture on campus could help him build up the social and cultural capital that is necessary for developing and attaining pragmatic aspirations. Thus, while one's orientation to college, level of academic preparation, and strategies for navigating the education system are important, that does not mean that they cannot be reshaped by the influence of peers. Students actively acquire, exchange, and demonstrate to their peers how to leverage social and cultural capital. Even for Determined but Disconnected students, the social capital they established with friends outside of MCC had a significant impact on the way they navigated college.

In this age, when emerging adulthood has increasing sociological significance, it should be no surprise that peer networks are of the utmost importance for young twenty-somethings navigating a public institution. A sociological feature of emerging adulthood is the shifting matrices of public and private support that an individual receives (Settersten and Ray, 2010). Privately, parents may support their adult children in different ways, or just have less influence in their lives. Publicly, they no longer have the support of the public k-12 system, and are expected to learn how to navigate public resources, more or less, on their own. Today, public and private support are shifting so much that the features of becoming an adulthood and navigating

higher education include the ability to manage uncertainty and be interdependent (Settersten et al., 2015). It can be argued that these two skills are especially necessary at the community college level, where students face more uncertainty about which career path to choose, and less support in maneuvering through the postsecondary system (Scott-Clayton, 2011; Bailey et al., 2015). *The Atlantic* journalist Ann Hulbert used Scott-Clayton's work to highlight the striking inequality in America's higher education system, arguing that "the existing postsecondary educational hierarchy could hardly be more perverse. Students at the bottom, whose life histories and social disadvantages make them the most likely to need clear guidance and structure, receive astonishingly little of either. Meanwhile, students at the super-selective top, prodded toward high ambitions and disciplined habits by attentive parents and teachers ever since preschool, encounter solicitous oversight every step of the way" (2014).

It is no wonder that community college peers turn to each other to help in tasks ranging from studying for a physics exam, interacting with college personnel, becoming a lab research assistant, finding a job, fixing a car, recovering from an encounter with the criminal justice system, or walking through trying family issues. In all of these scenarios that students discussed, we learn that peer networks are more than just reference information sources. Even in the case of the casual friendships Free Riders formed with their more socially and academically integrated peers, such a peer network was building, shaping, and reshaping students' cultural capital and college know-how. When peer networks are at their strongest, as in the case of Jeremiah and the friendships that he formed at the college, they are a counteracting force to the "environmental pull" discussed by Wood and Williams (2013), and allow their friends to get one step closer to attaining their goals. In either case, peer networks are acting against the aforementioned features

of the postsecondary education system that sustains inequality. Peer networks on community college campuses reveal that it is possible for these institutions to become places that help students "practice for life" (Cuba et al., 2016), much like private liberal arts colleges. Cuba's study of private liberal arts colleges demonstrates that these institutions help students learn how to make decisions that work towards their aspirations. Learning how to receive advice, relate to friends, and establish a sense of home are all important in this decision-making process. I think it is possible for community colleges to fulfill the same purposes for the mostly low income and minority students who engage with their campuses.

What would happen if more Determined but Disconnected students were plugged into peer networks on college campuses? By gleaning insight from how the other students laterally build cultural capital, one could imagine at least three positive results for DBDs. First, DBDs would be able to strengthen their own sources of cultural capital by collaborating with each other; such collaboration could help them to understand how the dispositions I have identified as resistant, navigational, aspirational and social capital work both towards and against their college and career goals. Second, they would have the opportunity to exchange capital with their peers who have more institution-valued forms of cultural capital. Lastly, their immersion in the culture of the college could steer their aspirations in other directions. On one level, this could look like Kendrick, who wanted to become the manager of a professional football team, deciding to become an engineer instead. On another level, it could look like Sharon, who said her goal is to escape the struggle, deciding that she wants to become securely middle class. This could happen when Determined but Disconnected students are confident that they have the skills necessary to close the gap between aspirations and attainment.

In order for peer networks to be most effective for Determined but Disconnected students, community colleges also must consider how racism operates in personally-mediated, institutionalized, and internalized forms. Because many community colleges receive a number of students of color who are underprepared for college, it is not hard to imagine a professor beginning to make assumptions about the capabilities of black students, or a black student assuming that nothing from her previous experiences prepared her for college. Institutional racism at the community college could happen when black students in remedial courses receive inflated grades, as grade inflation is already a common practice at community colleges (Rosenbaum, et al., 2006).

Some initiatives to improve community college outcomes are seeing inspiring results. ASAP, short for Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, is one such example. ASAP is offered at nine CUNY colleges and three Queensborough Community Colleges. The program's goal was to get 50% of ASAP students to attain an associate's degree within three years by providing students with "comprehensive support services and financial resources that remove barriers to full-time study, build student resiliency, and support timely degree completion" (ASAP, 2017). ASAP enrolls mostly young, urban students with an average enrollment age of 21. After the first three years of the program, ASAP graduated 48% of its students with developmental needs and 60.6% of "fully skills proficient" students. As of March 1, 2017, ASAP had a graduation rate of 53.2%. In the community college world, this success rate is unheard of.

The secret to ASAP's success is that it equips students who might be drawn to enroll as part-time students to enroll as full-time students. In so doing, ASAP students are as intensively immersed in college culture as four-year students on residential campuses. Their immersion

limits environmental pull factors, and also gives them the opportunity to fully engage in peer networks with other college students and build up the cultural capital necessary for college completion. Hulbert of *The Atlantic* article reported that "ASAP advisers presume that building habits of engagement takes concerted effort. It's not just that students are stretched thin by family and work demands. Many also lack college-savvy guidance at home, or past school experience to draw on. More often than not, underprepared students have drifted through lousy schools" that have not provided them with the skill set of an assertive learner. In other words, ASAP is providing a space for students to extend and exchange social and cultural capital. *The Atlantic* article also highlights one of ASAP's graduates, Duquan McGee. Coming out of a two-year prison sentence, and having failed his writing and reading placement tests, McGee enrolled in ASAP. McGee's advisor taught him to develop the skills to be assertive and advocate for himself in class. His advisor told him "You need to be stronger, find that confidence in yourself." In the cultural capital framework, the advisor took a concept that McGee is probably familiar with, self sufficiency, and taught him how to turn it into middle class capital. The director of ASAP reported to Hulbert, "There's definitely a shift, different for every student, when suddenly an immature, unfocused student gets more serious." The program worked for McGee. 2.5 years after enrollment, he graduated with an associate's degree.

Programs like ASAP teach us that the implementation of the lessons gleaned from this thesis is not a mystical process. Community colleges do carry the enormous burden of having to correct for stratification in the k-12 education system and equip underperforming students with the skills necessary to succeed in the postsecondary system. Nonetheless, Determined but Disconnected students, among others, can indeed be well-integrated into the college. It requires

institutional resources and effort on the part of college personnel as well as the proper investment of students' capital.

In order to better understand how cultural capital flows laterally, and how community colleges can see ASAP-like results for all of their students, more research needs to be conducted. Quantitative researchers should assess the number of students that are having an ISL, VC, FR or DBD experience at suburban versus urban campuses. Qualitative researchers should conduct a longitudinal study of student experiences, to understand how students change their strategies for resource building and sharing over time, and how this bears on their college and career outcomes. As we continue to develop a better understanding of the strengths that students bring to college, community colleges can see higher success rates and allow greater numbers of low income and minority students to be upwardly mobile and realize their aspirations.

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