



# Examining the Experiences of Community College Students

Colleen Keeler, Melanie Snyder, Abigail McLane, Bayley Saffier, and Zsa Zsa Alston with Dr. Mia Ocean, MSW, PHD

April 29, 2021

# Presentation Objectives

- Background
  - Provide literature related to topic and identify need for our research
  - Research Questions
- Method Section
  - Outline the purpose for the project
- Economy
  - Lack of funding
  - Low wages
- Social Support Systems
  - Unhealthy
  - Supportive Non-supportive
- Immigration Parents
  - Protective Factors
  - Risk Factors
- Recommendations

# Background

- Community colleges, while they provide an important opportunity for students' educational advancement, are criticized for their low graduation and retention rates, regardless of the populations they serve (Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Wyner, 2014)
- Access to financial aid, such as the Pell Grant, enables many low- and moderate-income families to afford college (College Board, 2012), and has been shown to influence student persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005)
- Our research seeks to investigate barriers and enablers to educational goal attainment
- **Research Question:**
  - What factors may hinder or facilitate community college student success?

# Methods

- Participants were financially eligible Pell Grant, current students at one of two community colleges in Florida who were seeking their Associate of Arts degree (n = 62)
  - Separated into two subgroups:
    - Students meeting academic eligibility requirement for the Pell Grant (n = 31)
    - Students not meeting academic eligibility requirement for the Pell Grant (n = 31)
- Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, in which they were asked directly about their connection to the community college and about their experiences there
- Codebook was developed based on empowerment theory (Gutiérrez & Lewis, 1999) and strengths-based theory (Hammond & Zimmerman, 2012)
- Six phases of iterative thematic analysis were used to analyze data (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
- Team-based analysis was used to further explore trends within the data (Fernald & Duclos, 2005 )

# Economy



# Lack of Funding

- The lack of funding for higher education has disadvantaged vulnerable populations while benefitting individuals with stable financial backgrounds. The high cost of tuition is discouraging to students who need financial support

**Lola:** I mean, yeah because the economy I think...because everyone knows that in America the price of education is like the highest and um that's based off of how our economy runs and a lot of colleges are um how do you say it...like not income based but profit based...so um a lot of times like schools will accept a student even if they're not *that* great, as long as they have the funds to pay for the education which is, I think it's completely wrong.

**Your:** And I do feel like if, if mo-, if there was money out there, if the economy was doing really well, then a lot more people would probably be going to college because there'd be more scholarships, more grants, just being thrown out everywhere. And everyone would be able to go to college.

**Ashli:** I think the economy, mostly, cuz I have been hearing school prices have been going up and up and up, and it's just like even if it's up and up, school to me just seems farther and farther away, the more these prices come up. Because if I don't have money, I can't go to school.

# Low Wages

- Students pursued higher education due to low wages that were insufficient to cover cost of living expenses

**Maria:** You know, because there've been times that I did a 24-hour shift...yeah, Just so I could make ends meet, you know. So, I mean, you figure, you need a, a, a good stable job where it's gonna pay you enough to pay your bills and actually have a vacation.

**Lily:** So that's what *really* pushed me to get back into school, from looking how workin' and jobs, you see how they treat you, you get paid *nothing* these days.

**Chanell:** Minimum wage in Tennessee is eight dollars, I believe. Although the cost of living has gone up –I know the minimum wage we go based on the cost of living there. Cost of living went up, minimum wage stayed the same.

# Social Support Systems



# Unhealthy Support System

- Personal stressors can be a major factor that impacts students' ability to reach their goals
  - Students stories about how they have unhealthy living arrangement and support while attending school

**Asha:** ...my own mom put me out, which *I* thought she would understand me, you know, because she knew I been working since I was sixteen [crying and speaking]. I would rather go have sex and get what I need, than to ask my momma.

**Alexis:** I mean it's not funny or it's not something to laugh about but I'm actually homeless right now.

**Interviewer:** So your parents are not supportive of you pursuing the education and stuff?

**Alexis:** No, they think I'm wasting my time.

**Lola:** I feel like they don't care at all. Like my dad... like he would prefer for me to be... go to real state school right now, actually. He's not the kind of parent to really care and neither is my mom. My mom is actually telling me like oh you should... she's always trying to get me into all kinds of businesses, like um like go to beauty school to do eyelash extensions, something like that...

# Supportive Non-Supportive

- Student identified a lack of support from some family and friends, which caused more issues with reaching their career goals

**Maria:** so your boyfriend, is he supportive of school?

**Maria:** He's supportive of school. But he's also, "Put me first, before school."

**Interviewer:** Does he get jealous of school, or does he worry that you cheat when you're here?

**Maria:** Um, he worries that I cheat when I'm here.

**Katie:** Um, maybe my second or third semester, um we broke up and it was *very* hard... To just let go and focus on school. So, that was actually when I was taking five classes, too, and with all this depression and all these classes, I ended up maybe failing two of those classes, cuz I knew... just stop... I just stopped going...

# Students of Immigrant Parents: Protective and Risk Factors



# Protective Factors

- Students are motivated to do well in school because their parents moved to the United States to give them a better life than their own
  - All students quoted were successfully meeting the Pell Grant standards

**Katie:** But then my family's my motivation, cuz I have to do what I have to do so that I can put them on top one day... so that they can live well. Like in Dominican Republic, my family's really poor, and they're all depending on me over here...

**Anais:**... well my mom mostly, tells me a lot of the time, I don't want *you* doing what *I* do, it's cleaning bathrooms. I want you to be professional. There's no reason, in this country there's no reason... you can't live off of just cleaning houses all your life. Like there's no excuse for these kids just like not go to school, the government pays for you.

**Mark:** What really motivates me is that I can do better than my parents, and that's what I'm tryin' to do---every single day, because my parents came from Africa...

# Risk Factors

- Students described their need to assist their non-English speaking parents
- Difficulties associated with a language barrier

**Anais:** But putting at the end of an essay, "you need to learn how to read"... not good. That's what she would put on my essays. And maybe cuz she categorized me as a Hispanic, and as in English my second language... She (professor) put, you need to learn how to read.

**Stephanie:** I help out my mother a lot, a lot, I'm with her like 24/7 because um, she, she's... we're from Guatemala, right?... So she speaks, um, to me in dialect and like I'm her translator like whenever we go somewhere. She needs me throughout the day, and she doesn't know how to drive either so I take her everywhere like you know...

**Zayy:** Uh, we, we work with a lot of low-income first-generation students- so we get a lot of Haitian descent students that come in, and, and language is a barrier for them, but it doesn't allow them to stop..... So I feel like, depending on what's your background, I feel like that determines where you stand with school.

# Recommendations

- Increase funding/financial support for students
  - Scholarships, grants, assistantships
  - Loan forgiveness programs
- Build support systems for students lacking social support
  - Access to free counseling
  - Peer support groups
- Train faculty/staff in cultural sensitivity/humility and biopsychosocial factors
  - Encouraging professors to allow extensions/leniency when students are dealing with issues outside of school
  - Increasing awareness of and improving response to language barriers and other cultural considerations

# References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Code of Federal Regulation. (2010). *Title 34 Education, Part 668, Student Assistance General Provisions, Subpart C Student Eligibility*. Retrieved from <http://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?rgn¼div8&node¼34:3.1.3.1.34.3.39.4>
- College Board. (2012). *Trends in student aid 2012*. Retrieved from <http://trends.college-board.org/sites/default/files/student-aid-2012-full-report.pdf>
- Fernald, D. H., & Duclos, C. W. (2005). Enhance your team-based qualitative research. *Annals of Family Medicine*, 3(4), 360–364. doi:10.1370/afm.290
- Gutiérrez, L.M. & Lewis, E.A. (1999). *Empowering women of color*. Columbia University Press.
- Hammond, W., & Zimmerman, R. (2012). A strengths-based perspective. *A Report for Resiliency Initiatives*, 1-18.
- Long, B. T., & Kurlaender, M. (2009). Do community colleges provide a viable pathway to a baccalaureate degree? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 31(1), 30–53.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research*. Jossey-Bass.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2014). *Federal Student Grant Programs*. Retrieved from <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sites/default/files/federal-grant-programs.pdf>
- Wyner, J. S. (2014). *What excellent community colleges do: Preparing all students for success*. Harvard Education Press.