
A thesis presented

by

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to the

Graduate School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

in the field of

Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
March 2019
Abstract

This study examined how working-class male students perceive their experiences during the first semester at a community college in order to identify strategies they employ to overcome challenges and achieve academic success. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven working-class male students who persisted to at least a second semester at a small, rural community college in the Northeast region of the United States. Transcripts were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to identify themes. Four major themes emerged: dealing with anxiety during the transition into the community college; establishing an effective school/work/life balance; building self-efficacy to achieve academic success; and, masculinity issues around the idea of male (dis)engagement. These findings were considered in light of the extant literature and Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production through the interaction of habitus, capital, and field, with an emphasis on Connell’s theory of the social construction of masculinities. The study suggests that maximizing male students’ sense of mattering and utilizing strategies that increase self-efficacy, especially First-Year Experience courses, can increase the likelihood of student persistence and achieving academic success.

*Keywords*: masculinities, working-class, community college, self-efficacy, student success
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. 2

Chapter One: Introduction to the Study ............................................................................. 5
  Context and Background ................................................................................................. 6
  Rationale and Significance ............................................................................................. 6
  Research Problem and Research Question ................................................................. 9
  Theoretical Framework ................................................................................................... 10

Chapter Two: Literature Review ....................................................................................... 19
  “I want a better way of life”: Working-Class Students ............................................... 20
  “Be a Man!”: The Problem of Male College Student (Dis)Engagement ..................... 27
  Creating Connection: Enhancing Student Engagement .............................................. 34
  Summary ......................................................................................................................... 40

Chapter Three: Research Design ....................................................................................... 42
  Qualitative Research Approach .................................................................................... 42
  Participants ..................................................................................................................... 47
  Procedures ...................................................................................................................... 49
  Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 57

Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis ................................................................................. 58
  Anxiety During Transition to College ......................................................................... 60
  School/Work/Life Balance ............................................................................................. 68
  Building Self-Efficacy to Achieve College Success .................................................... 78
  Masculinity Issues ......................................................................................................... 91
  Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 100

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice .................................................... 102
  Anxiety During Transition to College ......................................................................... 103
  School/Work/Life Balance ............................................................................................. 105
  Building Self-Efficacy to Achieve College Success .................................................... 109
  Masculinity Issues ......................................................................................................... 113
  Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 118

References ....................................................................................................................... 127

Appendix A ......................................................................................................................... 139

Appendix B ......................................................................................................................... 140
Acknowledgements

The completion of this doctoral study would not have been possible without the support of the many people who helped me throughout the process. First, I would like to thank my dissertation committee, Dr. Joseph McNabb and Dr. Kimberly Nolan of Northeastern University and Dr. Leo Hwang of Greenfield Community College, for reviewing my work and providing their insights and assistance throughout the process. Dr. Lynda Beltz was also tremendously supportive throughout my time in the Northeastern graduate program. I also thank my friends and colleagues at Berkshire Community College for their support, friendship, and the many conversations we have had about our students over the years. Many thanks go to the seven participants in my study who shared their college experiences with me. Without their willingness to share those stories, challenges, and successes with me, this study would not have been possible. As always, my most heartfelt thanks go to my wife, Lori DuBois, for her patience, support, love, and superior APA proofreading skills. For this dissertation as in all parts of my life, I simply could not do it without her.
Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

For roughly a decade, the focus of community college scholars and practitioners has shifted from the traditional open door mission to an emphasis on student retention and successful completion of college degrees (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Jones, 2015; O’Banion, 2010, 2011). Despite this ongoing attention, community college success rates remain low, especially for first-generation students, working-class students, and students of color. For working-class male students, this tendency to leave college without a degree is especially pronounced (Ewert, 2012; Harper, Berhanu, Davis, & McGuire, 2015; Weaver-Hightower, 2010). One strategy to develop a better understanding of why some working-class male students are able to experience academic success is, quite simply, to ask them. The purpose of this study is to explore working-class male students’ sense-making about their transition into and experiences during their first year at a rural community college. To better understand these students’ experiences during this transition, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology is employed. By encouraging these students to share their experiences, patterns of meaning-making are identified that stress challenges to and strategies for achieving academic success. The results of this study are expected to inform curricular and co-curricular design of the college’s First-Year Experience program to promote persistence and degree completion.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the research related to working-class, male community college students to provide context and background for the study. The rationale and significance of the study is discussed next, drawing connections to potential benefits for community college practitioners, administrators, and scholars. The problem statement, purpose statement, and research question are presented to focus and ground the study. Finally, the theoretical framework that serves as a lens for the study is introduced and explained.
Context and Background

A critical population is disengaging from the college experience at an alarming rate: working-class male students. The number of female students earning college degrees achieved parity in the 1980s, and women now earn a significantly higher proportion of college degrees (Ewert, 2012). Among African American and Latino/a students, female students are quickly outpacing their male counterparts in college degree completion (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Harper et al., 2015; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012). For community colleges, at which 46% of all undergraduates begin their pathway toward the college degree (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015), this trend is even more pronounced.

The college success of male students may not seem like a major issue. After all, historically, college has been the playground of affluent white males. We often picture “men in college” as a monolithic block of privileged, white males based on the traditional, hegemonic definition of masculinity (Harris & Edwards, 2010). That image describes very few male students attending community colleges, who often experience deep ambivalence about their new role as college students (Harris & Harper, 2008). As Weaver-Hightower (2010) argued, rather than treating male college students as a monolithic block, “we must account for socioeconomic status. To ignore class by focusing on all males is to extend even more privilege to those men who are already doing quite well” (p. 30). Therefore, this study seeks to investigate working-class male students’ perceptions of the challenges they face during their first year in the community college setting, as well as the strategies they employ to overcome those challenges and achieve success.

Rationale and Significance

There is little doubt that working-class students see the college degree as their ticket to a higher standard of living and a better life (Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015; Latz, 2012;
Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2014; Wood & Palmer, 2015). According to one line of sociological reasoning, however, the higher education system actually works to maintain the status and power of the privileged elite, with over 75% of students enrolled at the most selective colleges coming from the top quarter of family income (Stich & Reeves, 2016). While the goal of the open access community college is to offer a path to the college degree, all too often it can function as a roadblock rather than an open door. Engle and Tinto (2008) reported that among low-income, first-generation students beginning at community colleges, 63% said they wanted to earn a bachelor’s degree, but only 5% managed to transfer and earn a bachelor’s degree within six years. The reasons for that lack of success, however, can be quite complex, especially for working-class male students.

Harris and Harper (2008) found that, at the individual level, many working-class male students experience male gender role conflict (MGRC) in which societal messages of control, self-sufficiency and the ability to achieve success through one’s own efforts often come into direct conflict with the disorientation many students feel when they enter college. As working-class students transition to the unfamiliar terrain of the college campus, they often rely on a strong sense of personal responsibility and self-reliance. The cultural ethos of “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps” is a key factor in working-class identity (Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015). While this narrative of moral self-improvement can be empowering when the student succeeds, it can be especially destructive if the student fails (Nielsen, 2015). For instance, Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2007) shared the experience of a working-class student named Patrick who did not persist to the second semester. Patrick felt the need to solve his problems for himself, without seeking assistance from college administrators, student support staff, or faculty. Indeed, Patrick saw his faculty as setting up intentional roadblocks intended to
“weed out” the students who do not belong: “‘I just have it in my head that if I do go to their office, they are going to harangue me. They will say, ‘What are you doing here? You are a failure. Get out of here’” (p. 414). With powerful peer group messages whispering in their ear that college is unmanly and they should be earning money at a real job instead, working-class males like Patrick find it easier and more identify-reaffirming to stop attending college and go back to the world of work.

At the institutional level, community colleges must design successful interventions to help these students. While much has been done to improve the campus climate for many groups of students who have been historically underrepresented, the needs of working-class students continue to be overlooked (Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015). Soria (2015) asserted that student success courses are especially beneficial for working-class and first-generation students who lack the cultural capital enjoyed by more affluent, continuing-generation students. Windham, Rehfuss, Williams, Pugh, and Tincher-Ladner (2014) reported that 63% of students who successfully completed a college success course persisted from fall to fall, a rate much higher than those who did not take the course. However, gender was a major issue, with “females having a 94% higher chance of fall-to-fall retention than males” (p. 474). Just as alarmingly, students who enrolled in such a course but failed it or chose to withdraw from it were a staggering 81% less likely to persist than students who did not take the course. In other words, if the institution can get its students to take a student success course, it must be very well designed and delivered to make sure it achieves its desired effects.

At the societal, systemic level, the need to support working-class male college students has recently gained a great deal of attention. The “Completion Agenda,” advanced by the Obama administration, the Lumina Foundation, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation among
others, has clearly specified the need for more college graduates and the need to close the achievement gap (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Jones, 2015; O’Banion, 2010, 2011). While many argue that community colleges have a crucial role in achieving those goals, others read community colleges suspiciously as, paradoxically, roadblocks on the pathway to success. In short, students go into community colleges but do not come out. If community colleges do not find a way to raise their graduation rates without lowering their standards, public confidence, as well as the trust of their four-year partners, will continue to erode. First-Year Experience programming can be a means to bring students up to speed while simultaneously using a strengths-based, growth mindset approach to build students’ confidence and sense of self-efficacy. In order to live up to their promise as an open-access force that can serve as the gateway to social mobility and thereby counter social stratification, community colleges must find a way to help students persist and earn their degree. This is especially true for working-class male students who often feel pushed back out the supposedly open door.

**Research Problem and Research Question**

The purpose of this research is to gain insight into working-class male students’ perspectives of the First-Year Experience at a rural community college. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology is employed to capture working-class male students’ perceptions of the first year in the community college. By encouraging these students to share their experiences, patterns of meaning-making are identified that stress challenges to and strategies for achieving student success. The research question is: What strategies do working-class male students employ to overcome challenges and achieve academic success during their first semester at a community college?
**Definition of Key Terminology**

**Working-Class:** The term *working-class* refers not only to level of family income but also to a more deeply held sense of personal identity: “While income often is considered to be synonymous with social class, in actuality social class is a combination of economic status, values, beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions” (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007, p. 410). Furthermore, students’ sense of identity may be rooted in “generational poverty” in which they have witnessed “little or no evidence of how someone in the community [has] benefitted from education” (Jehangir, Stebleton, & Deenanath, 2015, p. 4). For this study, working-class will be operationalized as being eligible for receiving the federal Pell Grant.

**Student Success:** While the term *student success* may sound self-evident, it can have many different meanings. Some community college students enroll only to take one or two courses; some plan to earn a certificate or an Associate’s degree, while others plan to transfer to a four-year institution without earning an Associate’s degree. For this study, student success will be operationalized as earning a GPA of 2.0 and persisting to the second semester.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study utilizes Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production through the interaction of habitus, capital and field (Bourdieu, 1990, 1994, 2001; Dillabough, 2004; Reay, 2004), with an emphasis on the social construction of masculinities (Connell, 2005; Harris, 2008), as its theoretical framework. Throughout his long career Bourdieu explored how habitus, capital and field interact to form the individual’s sense of self through a constant, pre-scripted, dynamic interaction that results in social reproduction (Calhoun, 1993; Swartz, 1997). The term *habitus* can be understood as our “way of seeing”—the common sense, seemingly self-evident view of the way the world works. As Bourdieu explained in his book *Masculine Domination* (2001), gendered identity is especially deeply rooted in the habitus, implicating the individual’s sense of...
self in the gendered division of labor at the larger social level. Even within that larger process, however, important fractures in a monolithic sense of patriarchy are present. Connell (2005) argued that we need to think of multiple “masculinities,” not just “masculinity” to gain deeper understanding of men’s experiences. Neither simply biologically determined nor completely removed from embodied experience, men often attempt to live up to the ideals and demands of hegemonic masculinity while also experiencing male gender role conflict (Connell, 2005; Harris, 2008; O’Neil, 1981). When located in a specific field like the community college, men’s gendered sense of habitus can result in varied responses, ranging from engaging in violent, hypermasculinized overcompensation to utilizing scripts of self-sufficiency to achieve success (Harris & Harper, 2008). By combining habitus theory and critical masculinity theory, this study yields a powerful understanding of why some male community college students disengage while others strive for success in spite of those messages.

“Not for the likes of us”: Habitus and How It Works

The concept of habitus explains the way each member of society comes to understand the way that society works, and his or her own place within it. Bourdieu (1994) explained that through the process of early socialization, learned directly from the family and by watching the surrounding society, the child learns that the way the world works is the only way the world can or should work, that there is a “self-evident and natural order which goes without saying and therefore goes unquestioned” (p. 161). Bourdieu (1990) argued that this sense of habitus acts as the individual’s learned set of dispositions, “structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (p. 53) that establish the realm of the thinkable. Because we learn these lessons as part of our early socialization, and because they often correspond to our parents’ and peers’ way of seeing the world, they seem natural, unquestionable, and self-evident. To do something else, to reach beyond that socially accepted sense of what one ought to do, risks
getting above oneself, going beyond one’s station. In other words, this deep-seated, self-censoring sense of one’s place in the world excludes anything felt to be “‘not for the likes of us’” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56). Even without having someone tell us to “know our place,” we intuitively limit ourselves to our sense of that place, rather than risk discomfort or the social ridicule associated with reaching for something more.

Habitus is only one part of Bourdieu’s “analytical apparatus” (Calhoun, 1993, p. 66) for understanding the reproduction of social power. The concepts of capital (including economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital) and field are also vital components. The habitus is made meaningful within specific fields, “constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense or with value” (Reay, 2004, p. 435). When there is a disjunction between habitus and field, however, a sense of struggle or tension will emerge. Along with habitus and field, capital, particularly cultural capital, is significant. Cultural capital is comprised of the knowledge, culture, and educational credentials associated with “getting ahead”; while often measured by access to, familiarity with, and appreciation of high culture (literature, art, classical music, etc.), it can also include knowing how and when to reach out to advocates, gatekeepers, and decision-makers to maximize one’s chances for success (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Swartz, 1997). The key to these multiple forms of capital is not simply possessing them but knowing how and when “to convert one of these forms into the other”—in other words, to exert power within a specific field of human interaction (Calhoun, 1993, p. 69). These fields in which people interact with each other enact both the forms of capital as well as the habitus in an action of social (re)production. The forms of capital (or lack thereof) available to the individual work in concert with the person’s habitus to shape the realm of the thinkable, the ability and willingness (or lack thereof) to take a chance and make something happen. While not strictly determined by
class status, the sense of rightness, inevitability, or “fit” at stake in the interplay of habitus, capital and field help to explain why some people seem to have a “feel for the game”, while others struggle to move up the social ladder.

Reay (2004) explained that throughout Bourdieu’s career the concept of habitus emerged as individual, collective, and dynamic. An individual’s sense of habitus is shaped through his or her personal lived experiences, while also emerging from “the whole collective history of family and class that the individual is a member of” (p. 434). At the same time, however, habitus is not completely deterministic; rather, it is “permeable and responsive,” shaped by new experiences and new fields that are “continually re-structured by individuals’ encounters with the outside world” (p. 434). Those moments of disjunction, of disequilibrium between the expectations shaped within the habitus and the demands or taken-for-granted expectations of a new field, can lead to self-questioning that can result in growth or change. At its best, entry into the college experience should result in such a moment of disequilibrium. How individual students will react as they enter into this new field, however, is more difficult to predict.

“Be a man!”: Habitus and Multiple Masculinities

Although Bourdieu is often critiqued for his lack of attention to gender (Mottier, 2002; Skeggs, 2004), his book *Masculine Domination* (2001) identified gender differences as “sexually characterized habitus” that is “something complex, historical and fundamentally cultural in form” (Dillabough, 2004, p. 496). As forms of domination that are “built into everyday cultural life,” gendered differences serve as an “invisible culture” built into the daily processes of masculine domination and the subordination of women (pp. 494-495). Exactly what that gendered habitus for masculinity entails, however, is an ongoing question.

Often in our society, masculinity or what it means to “be a man” is assumed to be obvious and self-evident. Linked to biology or gender role, the traits associated with strength,
power, self-reliance, and dominance are easily assumed to be self-evident and self-defining. Connell (2005) challenged these understandings of masculinity, asserting that masculinity is not defined by biological determinism or even a tautological “male sex role.” Connell’s key term _hegemonic masculinity_ can be defined as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and subordination of women” (p. 77). Connell asserted that masculinity is always a project, an ongoing practice in which certain expectations are replicated without any guarantee of truly living up to that ideal: “‘Hegemonic masculinity’ is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable” (p. 76). For these reasons, especially when crossed with other identity formations of race and class, any individual’s sense of masculinity must be considered problematic and constantly in formation.

Additionally, Connell (2005) offered two important corollary ideas—the _patriarchal dividend_ and _complicit masculinity_. While individual men may not be able to live up to hegemonic masculinity, “the majority of men gain from its hegemony, since they benefit from the patriarchal dividend, the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women” (p. 79). Though the individual man might not be dominant in all his relations, and may even seek to disrupt the stereotypes associated with male control and female subordination, he is in the position of being complicit with that hegemony nonetheless. Yet by recognizing that this complicity is contingent, not biologically determined, men can challenge that system: “Men no more than women are chained to the gender patterns they have inherited. Men too can make political choices for a new world of gender relations. Yet those choices are always made in
Connell devoted the middle of section of his book *Masculinities* to presenting the “life histories” of “groups of men for whom the construction of masculinity was under pressure” (90). Just as Connell argues that gender is a practice that is shaped by and shapes the reality in which the individual lives, Bourdieu (2001) argues that masculine domination—the gendered aspects of habitus—are “forms of domination” that are “built into everyday cultural life” (Dillabough, 2004, 496). Based in the familial and societal lessons that construct the habitus, gendered norms lead to the constant self-evaluation and often self-doubt exposed by male gender role conflict (Harris, 2008; O’Neil, 1981). By viewing multiple masculinities as the gendered habitus in action, especially when crossed by identity formations of race and class, the “life histories” of men under pressure reveal the tensions, overcompensations and fractures of multiple masculinities that are anything but monolithic.
Critics of the theory

Skeggs (2004) and Mottier (2002) attacked Bourdieu for remaining too tied to “gender difference” as opposed to “gendered power.” His presentation of masculine domination assumes that women take on the subordinate role assigned to them by the patriarchal regime, as opposed to actively resisting that role through their own sense of agency. As Mottier (2002) put it, “there is too much structure and not enough agency in Bourdieu’s theory of practice in general….

While Bourdieu offers us a subtle account of the relations between practice and power, he fails to provide us with a conceptualization that, ultimately, would allow for critical agency” (p. 354). At the same time, however, Mottier acknowledged that Bourdieu’s theory of field and habitus should point out the “multilayeredness of relations between the genders whereby relations of power may partly overlap and partly contradict each other within different areas of social life” (355). For Mottier, Bourdieu’s analysis of masculine domination failed to recognize the potential for agency within that multilayeredness. Skeggs (2004) similarly found him lacking for “normalizing his own conception of the family by defining it as the universal norm” (p. 21). The structure of the habitus, Skeggs argued, limits its explanatory power: “Bourdieu’s terribly well organized habitus cannot encompass all the practices between gender and sexuality, the contradictions, plays, experimentations, swappings, ambiguities and passings both within gender and between gender and sexuality” (p. 27). In short, “Bourdieu’s own analysis is performative of the categories it seeks to critique” (p. 27).

These scathing poststructural indictments of Bourdieu for being too fixed in his sense of structuralism, I would suggest, downplay the level of messiness and play embedded in his sense of habitus and how it works. Reay (2004) emphasized that, for Bourdieu, the social world and the socialized body are always interacting upon each other; the body is “a socialized body. A structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or a
particular sector of that world—a field—and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world” (as cited in Reay, 2004, 432). While the subject is not completely free within the socialized world, the way the subject deals with that world is open to a level of freedom. As Dillabough (2004) emphasized, Bourdieu recognized that subjects have “the capacity to act in the social world without claiming a totalizing agency or an illusory, essentialist notion of freedom” (p. 498). The habitus and the field do indeed bound the possibility of choices, but within those boundaries the individual subject does have some degree of choice of how to proceed. Those moments of disjunction between newly encountered fields and previous socialization through the habitus, Reay (2004) argued, actually open up the potential for reconsideration, “weav[ing] together conscious deliberation with unconscious dispositions so that we can attempt to grapple analytically with aspects of identity such as our personal and political commitments that current conceptualizations of habitus marginalize” (p. 438). It is not impossible to act against the socializing messages of the habitus—it’s just painful and risky to do so.

**Application to the Study**

Reay (2004) emphasized that, for Bourdieu himself, habitus is a method rather than a topic: “first and foremost habitus is a conceptual tool to be used in empirical research rather than an idea to be debated in texts” (p. 439). Qualitative research based on individual interviews can be an especially effective way to capture students’ own sense-making of their experiences as they transition into the college environment. Allowing the students to tell their stories in their own way can be the best way to see their habitus in action (Bergeson, 2007). Following Connell (2005), what are the “life histories” of male community college students as they transition into the new field of the college experience? What assumptions do they have about college, what the college experience will be like, and their own abilities to survive and thrive on campus? How do
they navigate the new environment, and how are they dealing with the self-questioning that occurs for nearly all students during this key moment of transition? Do they have a strong sense of resilience and self-efficacy when facing an unfamiliar challenge, or do they already have one foot out the door? By engaging in conversations with working-class male students in the community college, this study explores their understandings of masculinity, class status, and the assets they bring with them to the college environment.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

For the last two decades, higher education scholars and the popular press have been sounding the warning about the lack of men attending college, as well as their lack of success if they do enroll. The number of female students enrolling in college and earning college degrees achieved parity in the 1980s; since then, the number of of women enrolling and earning degrees has surpassed men (Ewert, 2012; Weaver-Hightower, 2010). Among African-American and Latino/a students, female students have outpaced their male counterparts in college degree completion (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Sáenz, Bukoski, Lu, & Rodriguez, 2013). For community college students of color, this trend is even more pronounced (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014; Sáenz et al., 2013). As Burke (2013) and Kahn, Brett and Holmes (2011) argued, however, we need to resist a simplistic narrative suggesting that women are somehow achieving greater levels of college success at the expense of men. Rather, we need to ask which men are failing to persist and why. Even more importantly, we need to recast the deficit-minded narrative of disengagement and failing to persist, which tends to place blame on the students, to “strategies to succeed,” highlighting the conditions that foster and enhance student success (CCCSE, 2014; Harper, 2012; Harper et al., 2015; Schiefereck & Card, 2013).

In reality, and not surprisingly, not all male college students are struggling. Weaver-Hightower (2010) reported that “more men attend college today than ever before” (p. 30) and that affluent and middle-class, white college men continue to perform at the same level as their female counterparts. Weaver-Hightower cautioned that “focusing on all males is to extend even more privilege to those men who are already doing quite well” (p. 30). This group includes few male students attending community colleges, who are often less academically prepared, more at risk of being on academic probation, and seek academic assistance less often than their female
peers (CCSSE, 2014; Harris & Harper, 2008). For first-generation, low-income male students, the unspoken rules and expectations of the college culture can be an unintended barrier to success. Individual male students react to those challenges in disparate ways: striving for success against all odds (Pérez & Taylor, 2016); adopting an oppositional “prove them wrong” strategy to achieve success despite negative stereotypes (Wood & Palmer, 2015, pp. 45-46); turning to hyperaggressive masculinity based in sexism, homophobia, violence or high-risk behavior (Harris & Harper, 2008); or, simply deciding that college was never “right for them” and walking away. Too often community college practitioners dismiss these disengaged male students as the “boys in the back of the room with their baseball caps turned backward”—a phrase I’ve heard repeatedly throughout my career. Such an attitude, even if unintentional, puts the blame on the students’ disengagement or perceived personal disinterest rather than addressing institutional attitudes, messages, or policies.

This literature review will survey three main topics: “I want a better way of life”: Working-Class Students; “Be a Man!”: The Problem of Male College Student (Dis)Engagement; and, Creating Connection: Enhancing Student Engagement for Community College Students. As this overlapping and interrelated body of research makes clear, community college practitioners must find a way to decrease deficit-focused perceptions that result in stereotype threat (Harper et al. 2015; Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015; Wood & Palmer, 2015), increase perceptions of validation and mattering (Rendón, 1994, 2002; Schiefereck & Card, 2013), and implement promising practices for student engagement that benefit all students (CCSSE, 2014).

“I want a better way of life”: Working-Class Students
Like so many other groups of students, working-class students aspire to the social mobility and promise signified by the college degree. Schudde and Goldrick-Rab (2015) noted that “for Americans who obtain a college degree, economic success is independent of their
socioeconomic background, but this is not the case for people who lack college degrees. Non-college graduates from low-income families face difficulty overcoming their limited social, cultural, and monetary resources, constraining their opportunities for economic and occupational success” (p. 29). Hollifield-Hoyle and Hammons (2015) found that the desire for stable employment and the opportunity to escape the cycle of poverty were often identified as the main reasons to attend college. As one student put it, “Bottom line, I want a better way of life. I have gone to college to get a better job” (p. 51). Latz (2012) identified a key theme of freedom in community college students’ reasons for pursuing a degree: freedom from lack of economic opportunity, freedom to provide for their families, freedom to explore their own interests. The students themselves saw their choice to attend community college as positive and self-affirming: “Each of the participants viewed the community college as a vehicle for freedom, in the broadest sense” (Latz, 2012, p. 4).

While more students are making the choice to pursue that freedom, their levels of degree attainment remain alarmingly low. First-generation students are becoming increasingly prominent at both four-year colleges and community colleges. As recently as 2007, first-generation students accounted for about 17% of students entering four-year colleges; as of 2015, that number had climbed to 33% (Jehangir, Stebleton, & Deenanath, 2015). While community colleges are intended to serve as a low-cost pathway to transfer and completion of the Bachelor’s degree, Engle and Tinto (2008) reported that among low-income, first-generation students only 5% had successfully transferred and met that goal within 6 years. Hollifield-Hoyle and Hammons (2015) noted that studies of student retention, completion and success for low-income students often take a deficit model approach, attempting to “make up” the lack of cultural capital possessed by these students. By approaching working-class issues as a complex identity
construct and taking a strengths-based approach instead, we can gain a better appreciation for both the challenges and success strategies these students experience.

**Working-Class Identities**

Student identity issues in terms of first-generation or working class status might not be as self-evident as they first appear. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2007) explained that there are several definitions of the seemingly obvious term *first-generation*. While federal TRIO programs define first-generation as meaning that neither parent has earned a four-year college degree, the National Center for Education Statistics defines it more restrictively as being the first in the family to pursue education beyond the high school level. The term *working-class* includes more than just the level of family income; it also refers to the family’s experiences, assumptions, values, and expectations (Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015; Jehangir et al., 2015; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007; Martin, 2015). Beyond this sense of family inheritance, students’ sense of class identity may also be rooted in “generational poverty” in which they have witnessed “little or no evidence of how someone in the community [has] benefitted from education” (Jehangir et al., 2015, p. 4). In other words, being working class is not as simple as a paycheck—it’s a complex marker of personal identity just as nuanced and powerful as race, nationality, gender, or sexual orientation.

Soria (2015) employed Bourdieu’s (1990, 1994) concept of habitus to explore how first-generation, working-class students experience the college environment in terms of cultural capital, social capital, and academic capital. Whereas more affluent students have parents, family, and friends who have already attended college, working-class students might not have anyone to serve as a role model or guide. This lack of social capital combines with academic capital, meaning “the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in school [including] the influences of educational culture prior to higher education” (Soria, 2015, p. 17). The “college
knowledge” that seems to come so easily to students whose parents have already attended college can feel completely absent or alien to working-class students who are the first in their family or social circle to leave home for the ivory tower, or even the nearby community college.

This lack of college knowledge often contributes to a lack of fit or belongingness. Bergerson (2007) explored the experiences of Anna, a low-income, Latina student who reported never feeling a strong sense of “fit” at her college. While other students embraced the college environment to shape their new sense of identity, Anna turned her focus back home, to the family that had always supported her and that still needed her assistance financially. Eventually, Anna’s sense of discomfort within the college environment led her to transfer to a college closer to home. Similarly, Lehmann (2007) conducted a study of 25 first-generation students who decided to leave after their first year. Like Anna, a student named Nancy did well academically but felt highly uncomfortable on campus. When she told her parents she felt like dropping out and coming home, they simply responded “Well then come home” (p. 98). Seen through Bourdieu’s theoretical lens, Anna and Nancy do not simply suffer from homesickness; they leave the institution that does not “fit” them and return to a place that naturally, intuitively, self-evidently feels like “home.”

For some working-class students, family and friends might be suspicious or even hostile to the concept of going to college. The idea of postsecondary education can seem like a “foreign idea or space” (Jehangir et al., 2015, p. 7) far outside their own experiences. For others, it can seem like a waste of time, a distraction from earning money to help the family, or a direct betrayal of family identity. Lehmann (2007) found that many working-class, first-generation students expressed a “more fundamental rejection of the university: its values, what it stands for, the central role of its degrees for success, and its essential middle-class culture” (p. 100). Once
working-class students arrive in the classroom, things do not necessarily improve. Soria (2015) explained that assigned texts, examples, and class discussions can foreground an unspoken middle-class or upper-class bias, silently refusing to acknowledge class-based challenges and difficulties. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2007) reported that working-class students often perceive faculty as gatekeepers who “purposefully set up roadblocks” in order to “weed out” students who don’t really belong (p. 413-414). Working-class students may feel as if they are not really college students, that they are impostors, and when faced with the first major life-crisis, may opt to drop out of the unwelcoming college experience.

“I’ve got to do it myself”

In order to deal with the sense of disequilibrium experienced when facing the unfamiliar terrain of the college campus, working-class students often rely on a strong sense of self-reliance to overcome the challenge. Hollifield-Hoyle and Hammons (2015) found that “Students from poverty overwhelmingly credited their self-motivation and determination for their success” (p. 57). Martin, Galentino and Townsend (2014) captured similar student perceptions about their college experiences, noting that “Graduates expressed this innate motivation or desire to succeed against any odds over and over” (p. 231). When coupled with the lack of familiarity with navigating the new environment, however, this tendency to go it alone can be especially problematic. Moschetti and Hudley (2015) explained that while forming a close circle of college support staff can help to foster the college knowledge skills first-generation students often lack, these students frequently take pride in solving their problems themselves. As one student put it, “I mean, I have to be the one to be able to do it… I’ve got to do it myself” (p. 244). Nielsen (2015) identified a narrative of “moral self-improvement” in which successful working-class students view “high aspirations as indicators of moral worth” that, somewhat paradoxically, “draw boundaries between themselves and other disadvantaged people” (p. 266). This narrative
can be empowering because it casts the individual student as the hero who uses the power of grit and determination to overcome all odds—and thus more deserving than others who fell by the wayside. If the student fails, however, it can be especially destructive.

Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2007) shared the experience of a working-class student named Patrick who left college at the end of his first semester. Patrick interpreted his college experience through the lens of his parents’ messages about self-reliance: “‘that it is our job, and not anyone else’s, to look after us up to this point’” (p. 413). Whereas more affluent students from continuing-generation families know how to navigate the system and to advocate if they run into problems, Patrick did not feel entitled to ask questions: “People, who have people to guide them, who have people who have been through college, seem to be the ones that complain the most. But people like us, we don’t’” (p. 413). Relying on his personal script of independence, Patrick felt the need to solve his problems for himself, without seeking assistance from college administrators, student support staff, or the faculty whom he feared wanted to “weed out” the students who did not belong (p. 414). Unable to ask questions in class because he felt like an impostor and unwilling to ask for help outside of class because he felt like a failure, is it any wonder Patrick chose not to return to campus for a second semester?

Money Matters

Because community college students’ financial motivations and socioeconomic identities are so important to their decision to attend college, they must be incorporated directly into the question of student engagement. Nakajima, Dembo and Mossler (2012) identified students’ financial status and the need to work full-time while attending college as key danger signs for dropping out; indeed, “conflict with work was the predominant reason why community college students withdrew from their schools” (p. 594). Similarly, Martin (2015) found that low-income, first-generation students frequently described being overwhelmed by the financial realities of
their life. As one student put it, “‘the stress that I feel… makes me feel like a rubber band wound too tightly. I’m eventually going to break’” (p. 281). These financially-strapped students feel this stress in multiple ways, resulting not just from the high cost of tuition but also the opportunity costs represented by the inability to work more hours to earn more income (Stuart, Rios-Aguilar, & Deil-Amen, 2014). Additionally, they experience the frustration of missing out on meaningful academic opportunities because of the necessity to work (Martin, 2015). When pulled so forcefully in contradictory directions, many working-class students lose sight of the long-range economic earning potential of the college degree and return to the immediate necessity of earning the weekly paycheck, experiencing a sense of personal failure as a result.

Stuart, Rios-Aguilar, and Deil-Amen (2014) argued that the connection of academic programs to the current job market must be understood as a key reason to choose to persist, not just a reason to drop out. If the students clearly see the use-value of their coursework, the earning power of their degree, and the realistic likelihood of employment, they are much more likely to persist in the face of difficulties; however, if they hear that the college degree is unnecessary or if the coursework feels like busy work, they are much more likely to leave before earning the credential. Rather than considering these financially-based decisions as unfortunate distractions, Stuart, Rios-Aguilar, and Deil-Amen (2014) argued community college practitioners must “consider students’ cost-benefit calculations on their decisions to persist” as “similar to how they treat any other investment decision” (p. 333). In other words, community college practitioners must provide the tools to help our students truly understand these financial implications for both the short and long term.

**Conclusion**

American community colleges exist to serve as the open door to higher education for students who might not be able to access it in any other way (Boggs, 2011; Dowd, 2007). As a
low-cost entry into the college experience, community colleges are designed to meet the needs of low-income students with substantial job and family commitments. And yet, these well-intentioned institutions consistently suffer from extremely low rates of persistence and completion. All too often, that failure to persist is read through the lens of deficit: the students lack the academic skills that would make them college ready; they lack the opportunity to give their college courses their full attention due to the demanding realities of their lives. Even worse, they often see themselves and are seen by faculty as “not college material,” which leads to blaming them for their lack of persistence and success. As the literature on working-class, first-generation students reveals, however, the low rates of persistence are often the result of a very complex identity construction based in generational poverty, contradictory messages about what it means to be self-reliant, faculty skepticism of student ability, and explicitly contradictory messages about the “cost” and “value” of a college education. Rather than viewing working-class community college students through the lens of deficit thinking, we must identify ways to acknowledge and validate the strengths and strategies these students bring to the open door of the community college with them, while also supporting them as they learn to navigate this new environment. While this challenge can be substantial for any low-income, first-generation student, it can be especially difficult for working-class male students who might see college itself as a threat to their sense of masculinity and what it means to be a man.

“Be a Man!”: The Problem of Male College Student (Dis)Engagement

Working-class male students can be viewed by community college practitioners as uninterested and unengaged, as the “boys in the back of the room with their baseball caps turned backward.” As with working-class students in general, however, we must be careful to place that perceived disengagement within the context of complex identity construction and institutional environment, not as a simple character trait. Harris and Harper (2008) explained that our culture
often dissuades working-class men from going to college in the first place, seeing it as a waste of
time or somehow effeminate. Similarly, many of the key experiences that promote student
success, such as working with a tutor or using professors’ office hours, are seen as outside of the
“guy code.” For male students of color, these negative messages are often compounded by racial
microaggressions and stereotype threat, leading to even more pronounced disengagement
odds, many working-class male students and male students of color do survive and thrive within
a system of higher education that can seem to be stacked against them. By recognizing the
multiple, complex factors that shape male college students’ identities, and by identifying the
strategies by which they excel, community college practitioners can better understand the
conditions and support that can help these students achieve college success.

**Multiple Masculinities**

In a series of articles Frank Harris III and his colleagues interrogated masculine identity
construction and male students’ experiences in the college environment (Harris, 2008; Harris &
Harris argued that we need to think of *multiple masculinities*, not just a singular or simplistic
“masculinity,” especially within community colleges. Harris and Harper (2008) and Davis
(2010) identified O’Neil’s (1981, 2013) theory of Male Gender Role Conflict (MGRC) as
especially relevant for understanding multiple interpretations of manliness on campus. Gender
role conflict occurs when “rigid, sexist or restrictive gender roles result in personal restriction,
devaluation, or violation of others or self” (O’Neil, 2013). Harris and Edwards (2010) conducted
a series of qualitative interviews that gave male students the opportunity to reflect on their often
conflicted experiences as men in the college culture. The male participants admitted that they
frequently put on a false guise of aggressive masculinity, resulting in a strong sense of
disconnection between the man they pretended to be to please the peer group, as opposed to the “real man” they aspired to be.

For first-generation, working-class male students in community colleges, MGRC can be particularly pronounced. Harris and Harper (2008) argued that working-class definitions of masculinity stress the importance of being the breadwinner, being self-reliant, and rejecting help-seeking behavior. Faced with the new challenge of college, some working-class male students retreat into aggressiveness, sexism, and homophobia to reaffirm their sense of self. Harris and Harper (2008) reported that college men often engage in excessive drinking or drug use, hypersexualization of women, and anti-intellectual attitudes. They shared the experiences of Adam, a community college student who began struggling in his classes, abusing alcohol, engaging in risky sexual behavior, and initiating violent altercations. When his girlfriend suggested he get help through the school’s student support services, “Adam refused for fear that his classmates and professor would view him as incapable. ‘They already think I’m stupid and don’t belong here. I am not going to kiss their asses to pass a class!’” (Harris & Harper, 2008, p. 31). Faced with a false choice between enacting an aggressive, independent male persona or seeking help with college activities, Adam opted to leave college altogether.

“The perfect storm”: Challenges facing male students of color

For the last decade a number of scholars have investigated the experiences of male college students of color and the reasons why they frequently fail to persist to college completion. As Bush and Bush (2010), Strayhorn (2011), Harper (2012), Wood (2014), and Wood and Palmer (2015) have argued, the answer is not to problematize male students of color themselves. Bush and Bush (2010) declared that we must “call out the elephant” of male student of color disengagement by casting a critical eye on the institutions that are not doing enough to help these students engage: “The ramifications of the lack of support is that African American
male students are not engaged nor are they encouraged to access college services that have been proven to be advantageous to student achievement in four-year and two-year colleges” (p. 57). In other words, the colleges themselves are shirking their responsibilities to serve their most at-risk populations.

The work of Strayhorn (2011) and Wood (2014) offered an especially cogent explanation of how negative institutional messages can serve to discourage student success among male students of color. Strayhorn (2011) noted that African American college students are more likely to be first-generation, to come from single-parent families, and come from high schools that “actively discouraged [them] from completing a high school curriculum that prepares them for college” (p. 439). Predictably, these students then must complete one or more developmental courses, especially at community colleges. Being informed that they are not “college ready” can lead to self-questioning, but it can also lead to professors and support staff viewing these students as inferior and even “using disparaging words such as uneducable, lazy, dangerous, loud and threatening” (p. 440). When these students pick up on these negative preconceptions, Wood (2014) argued, they do not fully engage because of lack of confidence or fear of appearing stupid. As one student explained, “‘I mean if the teacher asks me to say something or asks me a question or something like that, then I’ll answer it … but I’m not like gonna just raise my hand, like thinking I know the answer and stuff…. I don’t wanna embarrass myself’” (p. 793). This self-protective disengagement comes in response to the student’s perception of the instructor’s skepticism of his ability. He is unwilling to stick his neck out and put himself in a vulnerable position that might confirm the negative stereotype.

Bukoski and Hatch (2016) related similar experiences for Angel, a Latino student attending a Houston-area community college. Angel demonstrated a clear sense of independence
and self-reliance in his approach to the college experience, while also clearly showing distrust of the institution and his professors: “You gotta be strong enough to fix it. You can’t just sit back and let ’em [professors] walk over you. You’ll never learn anything… You don’t have to stoop to no one’s level. There’s always a way out. There’s no trap in life, there’s always a way out. So, you just gotta find it” (p. 107). While Angel clearly takes satisfaction from this self-reliance and his ability to navigate the system independently, he also has an adversarial view of his professors as laying “traps” for him. He has secured his college education in spite of the institution, not because of it.

Wood (2014) labeled this deficit-thinking model combined with male students’ lack of willingness to engage in interpersonal connection as “the perfect storm,” where the confluence of student apprehension to engage for fear of being perceived as academically inferior coupled with faculty members’ “approach me first” and “prove yourself first” stance served to further complicate apprehensive actions in the classroom. This placed the responsibility for student success solely on the student, despite numerous messages received from others (e.g., faculty, student) that suggested the futility of their engagement. (p. 795)

Not only do the students miss out on getting the help they need, but they also read that lack as a personality flaw. This “engagement apprehension” is not simply a regrettable misunderstanding; it is the “nexus of masculine and racial stereotypes” (Wood, 2014, p. 797) that is the core of the problem. While Angel’s attitude clearly demonstrates this perfect storm of student disengagement, his overall message also captures why it is so important to address this problem: “Help us because we’re trying. Because with all that we said, we’re still here, we’re still waking up and going to school, we’re not giving up” (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016, p. 108).
**Institutional Responsibility**

In their guidebook for community college practitioners, Wood, Harris and White (2015) suggested that institutions and traditional student development theories take a deficit perspective by putting student success completely on the student. Commonplace statements like “If students expect to benefit from what this college has to offer, they have to take the initiative…” or “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experiences” (p. 12) place the onus for student success on the student. The “elephant” Bush & Bush (2010), Strayhorn (2011), Harper (2012) and Wood (2014) call out is that the responsibility must be shared by the college itself. We must design intentional, effective interventions that can help these male students to engage with the college experience. Just as importantly, we must show these students that we care: “Support may be available and efficacious, but if faculty and staff do not communicate an authentic care for the student, then the support may go unused. Students must believe that faculty members authentically care about them, personally and academically” (Wood, Harris, & White, 2015, p. xiv). We cannot dismiss our disengaged male students as simply being “the boys in the back of the room with their baseball caps turned backward”; we must work to understand the complex reasons why some men thrive and some men disengage.

Wood (2014) began his discussion of engagement apprehension by quoting from a personal communication with another college administrator: “Administrators and teachers alike are seemingly content to speak about Black males, at Black males, or for Black males, but rarely are [they] inclined to speak with Black males about their education” (p. 785). Pérez and Taylor (2016) and Harper and Newman (2016) reversed that trend by asking Latino and Black male students at elite, predominantly white institutions about their experiences as they transitioned into the college. Pérez and Taylor (2016) identified *logradores*—Latino male achievers—who
successfully drew on strong family expectations about the importance of college, navigational capital about ways to thrive within unfamiliar and even antagonistic environments, and resistant capital to excel despite subtle (and not so subtle) expectations of failure. Similarly, Harper and Newman (2016) identified the strategies used by Black male college students during their transition into four-year universities to form strong peer groups and mentoring relationships to navigate the predominantly white institution. In both cases, the male students were able to draw on family narratives about the importance of college and to construct social connections that reinforced academic success. In other words, they found ways of feeling that the college experience, and themselves within that college experience, mattered. This feeling of “mattering” (Schieferecke & Card, 2013) seems to be the central ingredient in achieving connection and success. Mattering is “the individuals’ perceptions that they are important, significant, and of concern to another individual, an organization, or the world” (p. 88). Yet in the world of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Harris, 2008), what counts as mattering can often be misread or misinterpreted.

Conclusion
The transition into the community college experience can be especially difficult for working-class men. In narratives of working-class male identity that cast college as effeminate, the male college student may feel that he doesn’t matter if he is not earning a steady pay check; the opportunity cost of not making money can make him feel that he is failing to matter, failing to “be a man.” Faced with faculty low expectations for male working-class male students and male students of color, these students shut down rather than risk confirming stereotypes of low intelligence or low cultural capital. Not wanting to embarrass themselves, they self-protectively disengage rather than say something that might make them matter less. Finally, when faced with academic challenges that might be best addressed by seeking out extra help from a tutor or
speaking with the professor in office hours, these students may retreat into hypermasculine performances of misogyny, homophobia, or violent behaviors to prove that they matter, that they are a “real man.” Rather than viewing these behaviors as character traits or signs of simple “disengagement,” we must interrogate the causes of these behaviors and seek to foster more positive forms of mattering. As the literature on socio-academic integration reveals, achieving this sense of connection and validation is incredibly important, yet easier said than done.

**Creating Connection: Enhancing Student Engagement**
For all college students, forming a strong sense of connection to the institution is a crucial part of the college experience. Tinto’s (1993) theory of student integration is often seen as the seminal work on student engagement. In short, Tinto argued that students must develop a strong sense of academic and social integration and connection to the college. Students suffering from a sense of isolation or incongruence (i.e., lack of fit) may feel like outsiders and are much more likely to choose to leave (Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2010). Because Tinto’s model was developed to explore the traditional, residential, four-year college experience, it is less applicable for commuter, community college students. Indeed, Tinto himself acknowledged that his model “is not readily suited to the study of attrition at commuting institutions where forms of institutional communities are tenuous at best” (as cited in Davidson & Wilson, 2013, p. 330). Several critics have adapted Tinto’s model to focus on the needs of commuter students, placing the emphasis on social connections formed in the classroom in order to help these students feel more connected to and empowered by the community college. If curricular and co-curricular programs are designed intentionally to validate students’ experiences, build on their strengths and foster self-efficacy, provide substantial opportunities to apply new college knowledge and self-reflective skills, and challenge students to critically rethink their unquestioned assumptions,
then they can help working-class students, students of color, and all students to achieve college success.

**Constructing socio-academic integrative moments**

For most commuter and community college students, the classroom experience *is* the college experience. They usually do not have the opportunity to become involved in clubs or other purely social activities. Deil-Amen (2011) emphasized that community college students must navigate the college, form meaningful connections with faculty and other institutional agents, and create bonds with other students—all while running from class to their cars to get back to their extremely busy lives. Labeling these opportunities and strategies *socio-academic integrative moments*, Deil-Amen (2011) highlighted deliberately constructed experiences “in which the academic influence is coupled with social integration to provide needed support and enhance feelings of college belonging, college identity, and college competence” (p. 73).

Social/academic interactions *within the classroom* allow these students to interact socially with other students as well as the professor while still remaining focused on course material. Deil-Amen also emphasized that these students are looking for a cohort group with similar goals that can serve as sources of relevant information and support, not people to become their best friends for life. By deliberately constructing such moments within the curriculum and co-curriculum, the institution can enhance the students’ sense of connection that correlates strongly with persistence and completion.

**Creating a synergistic support system: First-Year Experience courses**

First-Year Experience (FYE) student success courses are especially well-suited for constructing these socio-academic moments (Karp et al., 2010). For first-generation students in particular, these courses provide a concentrated, explicit introduction to the unspoken rules of college culture (O’Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009; Soria, 2015). As one student put it, “When
you’re coming straight out of high school, you have somebody telling you what to do and how to do it and when to do it. And then you get to college. … When I went the first time, they never told me anything to expect so I didn’t know what to do” (Karp & Bork, 2012, p. 11). For community college students who do not have a clear understanding of the study skills and other tools for navigating the college environment—and for faculty who may have never thought to speak their unspoken assumptions aloud—being explicit about college knowledge expectations is incredibly important for promoting student success. As Karp and Bork (2012) advised, “Only if the expectations are clearly defined, in actionable and meaningful ways, can students live up to them” (p. 8). By merging academic concerns with student support services, FYE student success courses create the academic capital that can help these students feel welcomed and empowered.

Shumaker and Wood (2016) highlighted students’ sense of control and self-efficacy in making use of student support services. Identifying a “utilization gap” between student support services offered by the institution and the rate at which first-generation students make use of them, they warned that first-gen students “become isolated while experiencing frustrations with the educational systems” (p. 10). Interestingly, however, they found that among the nearly 1400 students in the sample set, first-generation students actually used student support services at the same rate as their continuing-generation peers, but did not experience the same level of positive results. By linking these services directly into the FYE course, students can receive contextually specific coaching about when to use them to put themselves in the best position to achieve success.

In a recent qualitative study, Acevedo-Gil and Zerquera (2016) shared the personal experiences of twenty-four students enrolled in a FYE program that included individualized academic counseling, supplemental instruction, and cohort-based classes. Notably, the students
who participated in the program heard about it from friends or siblings who had already completed it, so they were predisposed to value the experience. One student described the powerful combination of having her advisor embedded in the student success course:

“Everybody else has to go downstairs to all the other counselors. You get a different advisor every time. But here I have my own (advisor)—they know my story. They know me personally. They’ve seen me cry” (p. 75). This personal attention, in combination with the usual FYE course curriculum, helped these students stick to their goals and persevere when times got tough. As Acevedo-Gil and Zerquera (2016) summed it up, “Participants’ experiences reveal how each individual resource or practice reflected in the student success program was not singularly sufficient but created a synergistic support system for students” (p. 78). The coordinated, strategic combination of all the interconnecting supports is what makes the difference.

**Validation and fostering success**

While Tinto’s (1993) model of student integration emphasized the student’s role in reaching out to the institution, Rendón (1994) argued that many first-generation students, especially African American and Latino/a students, respond more positively when an institutional practitioner reaches out and establishes contact. As she summed up, “when someone took the initiative to lend a helping hand, to do something that affirmed them as being capable of doing academic work and that supported them in their academic endeavors and social adjustment” (p. 44), these students are much more likely to persist and succeed.

Tovar (2015) and Campa (2013) explained that such validation is absolutely essential because very often, intentionally or not, students of color and working-class students are actively invalidated by their college experience. Viewed through the lens of deficit thinking, Latina/o, African American and working-class students are often openly mocked, implicitly ignored, or rendered invisible. Tovar (2015) noted that this stereotype threat can be reduced in part through
the intervention of validating institutional agents. Similarly, Campa (2013) identified “pedagogies of survival” that link the students’ sense of resilience and cultural identity to ongoing struggle; because they and their families have struggled and survived despite societal discrimination, they have achieved a sense of orgulla (pride) in their ability to resist and thrive. Campa (2013) argued that institutional agents must strive “to understand the epistemology that shapes the worldviews of these students,” to remain vigilant for negative messages and microaggressions that may make them feel unwelcome, and “provide them with opportunities to practice and reshape their pedagogies of survival and engage them in learning more in harmony with their ways of knowing” (p. 450). By validating our students in these ways, we can redefine what the truly inclusive college experience should be to help all of our students feel welcomed, validated, and included.

Rendón (2002) described an extensive FYE program called Community College Puente that demonstrated validation and the celebration of cultural inclusiveness. Community College Puente included an English class that culminated with an I-Search paper that combined citation of published material with less formal material drawn from the students’ own social circles. This project introduced the students to the rigorous demands of college-level work while also validating other ways of knowing drawn from their own lives. Similarly, Morales (2014) enlisted Rendón’s validation theory to offer specific classroom strategies that can “create an environment conducive to resilience” (94). Morales suggested that first-year college courses begin with meaningful activities that are “heavily effort based” (p. 96) rather than based on abstract thinking or outside knowledge. It is up to the teacher to help provide specific, useful strategies to help the student improve. In this context, an effective, caring, mentoring faculty member becomes the “‘cultural glue’ that connects the students’ precollege experiences, values and norms with those
of higher education and academia” (p. 100). By recognizing, including, and validating these rich experiences as strengths, the curriculum is strengthened for everyone.

In a report titled *Aspirations to Achievement: Men of Color and Community Colleges*, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2014) emphasized the importance of socio-academic integration. Drawing on material from focus groups with community college students in four different states, the report identified personal connections, high expectations, and meaningful interactions with faculty and peer mentors as critical elements for achieving success. Quality interactions with academic support programs were seen as equally important; as one student put it, “Go out and get involved in the process and find out about all of the various programs. Search it out like it’s gold” (CCSSE, 2014, p. 13). In short, the CCSSE study is calling for community colleges to create socio-academic integrative moments for all of its students: “Do what works for all students… fostering personal connections, setting high expectations, and providing high quality instruction from engaged faculty” (p. 25). By taking this approach for all students, no one sub-group will feel singled out. By providing validation experiences like these, all students will experience the sense of mattering so crucial to integration into the community college experience.

**Conclusion**

Because community college students lead extremely busy and complicated lives, often juggling the demands of full-time jobs and full-time families along with their college coursework, they often feel disconnected from their college experience. By mindfully creating socio-academic integrative moments in the classroom, professors can create deeper, richer learning experiences for their students. At the same time, all community college practitioners, including professors, administrators and student support staff, must work to create the feeling of caring and validation that makes all students feel welcome and appreciated. Too often, working-
class students and students of color do not feel validated or welcome. It is up to the community college, not to the students, to work to make those connections as meaningful as possible for all students who choose to attend.

**Summary**

It does little good to speak about the needs of “men in college.” There is no single male college experience, any more than there is for any other group. Rather, we must ask “which men, under what circumstances, and how does their own understanding of masculinity contribute to their motivation” (Kahn, Brett, & Holmes, 2011, p. 77). For working-class male students at the community college, we must remember that identity is intersectional, not simply additive. Wilkins (2014) explained that the intersectionality of race, class and gender “do not operate as distinct categories of experience but are lived conjointly… It’s not that people’s experiences are shaped, for example, by being men and black, but that experiences are shaped by the specificity of black masculinity” (p. 172). For that reason, the totality of all parts of the individual’s habitus will interact in complex ways to yield the individual’s lived experience. A black male student whose parents went to an Ivy League college, for example, will have a much different transition into college than a white, working-class student whose single parent tells him he should be getting a real job instead. Only by asking specific male community college students about their experiences can we learn the nuance of their transitional experiences, their sense-making about that transition, and the strategies they use to overcome challenges and persist to their second semester and beyond.

Even with that attention to intersectionality in mind, however, two key themes emerge clearly from the literature on working-class students, male students, and socio-academic integration. First, we must avoid reading students through the lens of deficit narratives. Rather than focusing on what students lack, what they can’t do, and what we need to do to make them
“college ready,” we need to focus on their strengths, the assets and strategies they possess for navigating new environments, and their tendency to be self-reliant in solving problems. Second, to help them direct that self-reliance, we must focus on validating their experiences, forming welcoming and supportive classrooms and campus environments, and helping them to navigate that new environment. College is supposed to expose students to new ways of thinking that challenge their pre-existing understanding of the world around them. For working-class male students, however, the unspoken rules and expectations can be an unintended barrier to success. When professors and other students use the insider language of academia, they (intentionally or not) demarcate who is really college material and who is not. If we as community college practitioners can foster and enhance experiences that make students feel validated and that they matter, then these practices should indeed help these students—all students—to succeed. The best way to design those practices to meet the needs, concerns, and success strategies of community college students is, quite simply, to ask them themselves.
Chapter Three: Research Design

This study explores the experiences of working-class male students during their first semester at a community college, as well as the strategies they employ to achieve academic success. This chapter presents the study’s research design and explains the researcher’s methodological choices. In the first part of this chapter, the research approach is explained. The second part of the chapter presents a detailed account of how this study was conducted, including discussion of ethical considerations, trustworthiness, the researcher’s positionality, and possible limitations of the study.

The central research question driving this study is: What strategies do working-class male students employ to overcome challenges and achieve academic success during their first semester at a community college? We need to think of multiple masculinities, not just “masculinity,” to understand the complex experiences of first-generation, working-class men in college, especially community college (Connell, 2005; Harris, 2008; Harris & Harper, 2008). When faced with college-level curriculum that challenges their self-image, some working-class male students may retract into earlier modes of identity construction to reaffirm their sense of self—codes that often rely on aggressiveness, sexism, and homophobia. Despite those challenges, however, some working-class male students are able to achieve academic success through their resilience, self-reliance, and ability to tap into college resources. This research study uses an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology to explore working-class male students’ perceptions about their expectations and experiences during that transition.

Qualitative Research Approach

This study uses a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of the research problem. The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm was selected based on the researcher’s philosophical alignment with its assumptions. Unlike the post-positivist paradigm, which
assumes that through “objective, neutral, and rigorous means” we can find “the one best answer” through quantitative measurement and objective observation, the constructivist-interpretivist researcher recognizes that multiple, competing truths are embedded in the “ongoing story” constantly being refashioned, re-experienced, and retold by the participants (Butin, 2010, p. 60). Ponterotto (2005) contrasted nomothetic research that seeks to uncover “general patterns of behavior that have a normative base” with idiographic research that seeks to understand, document and interpret the individual as “a unique, complex entity” (p. 128). Similarly, the term etic refers to “universal human laws and behaviors that transcend nations and cultures and apply to all humans,” while emic refers to “constructs or behaviors that are unique to an individual, sociocultural context” (p. 128). Whereas the post-positivist research would use quantitative measures to establish trends and tendencies within a statistically significant population, the constructivist-interpretivist researcher relies on in-depth, one-on-one interviews, case studies, or small focus groups to gain access to deep, rich experiences as the students themselves would describe them. Because this study seeks to explore students’ own perceptions about their experiences, qualitative methods are most compatible with the research goals.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is the methodological approach selected for this study. IPA allows the researcher to explore a small number of participants’ accounts of their experience, capturing each participant’s voice in order to represent both the interviewee’s sense-making and the interviewer’s analysis of the situation. IPA is committed to “exploring, describing, interpreting, and situating the means by which our participants make sense of their experiences” (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006, p. 110). This methodology’s three-part commitment to phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography make it the ideal approach for
gaining a better understanding of how working-class male students understand their new experiences in college.

“Back to the things themselves”: Phenomenology

IPA brings together the phenomenology of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, the hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer, and a strong commitment to idiography (Smith, 2004). For Husserl, phenomenology focused on the careful examination of human experience from the point of view of the experiencer. Rather than matching human experiences to a pre-existing theory, Husserl sought to “go back to the things themselves” so that we might capture the “essential qualities of that experience” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 12). In order to do so, the researcher must step outside preconceived theories, pre-existing biases, or the everyday “natural attitude” of common sense to share the experiencer’s perceptions: “In order to be phenomenological, we need to disengage from the activity and attend to the taken-for-granted experience of it” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 13). This process, known as the Epoche or the phenomenological reduction, involves bracketing all presuppositions and seeing the experience only from the experiencer’s point of view (Moustakas, 1994; Giorgi, 2011). For Husserl, the point was to establish the essence of the experience in order to transcend particularity and thus capture the universality of the experience (Smith et al., 2009, p. 14).

For Heidegger, by contrast, the lived world was a meaningful world, a world made meaningful by “the practical activities and relationships which we are caught up in, and through which the world appears to us, and is made meaningful” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 17). Thus the experiencer is always a person-in-context, a person who is interpreting and making sense of experiences within the situated context. Merleau-Ponty went even further, emphasizing the “embodied” experience of the world, the body as the necessary point of engagement with the world and thus part of the knowing experience: “All my knowledge of the world, even my
scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view’” (as cited in Smith et al., 2009, p. 18). This embodi-ness, this situatedness makes the representation of the phenomenon from within, rather than a quest for universality, the primary site of meaning-making.

**Knowing me, knowing you: Hermeneutics and interpretation**

IPA is not just a representation of another person’s experience; it is also an interpretation of those experiences. Heidegger emphasized that the phenomenological is not just the phenomenon, but also the logos—the analysis of that experience that forces the experiencer to make meaning about or grasp the significance of the event (Smith et al., 2009, p. 24). Most often experience is observed from what Husserl called the “natural” perspective, the everyday position of common sense. Heidegger insisted that as part of the interpretation, however, the analyst must not simply rely on presupposition or “fore-conception” to make that meaning: “Our first, last, and constant task in interpreting is never to allow… fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out the fore-structures in terms of the things themselves” (as cited in Smith et al, 2009, p. 25).

Gadamer offered a similar warning about the nature of “fore-projections,” cautioning that the interpreter is always in the process of forming meanings by projecting expectations onto the representation of the experience. The interpreter must be on constant guard for those assumptions which are never fully bracketed. Rather than being placed beyond the state of fore-conception, the interpreter must be highly aware of existing bias and open to the creation of new meaning. That iterative process and self-awareness forms a hermeneutic circle in which I as the interpreter am highly aware of myself watching you, the experiencer, experiencing the phenomenon and drawing meaning from the event. This process of “knowing me, knowing you” without imposing pre-existing expectations or bias becomes the heart of the IPA interaction.
**Idiography: Embracing the particularity of the particular**

Jonathan Smith emphasizes that IPA has a strong commitment to idiography; that is, to the importance of the particular. Rather than relying on a quantitative approach that attempts to establish a statistically significant section of a population, IPA “is committed to understanding how particular experiential phenomena (an event, a process or relationship) have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context” (Smith et al, 2009, p. 29). By using purposefully small, well-chosen individuals or small groups, the researcher can dive deeply into the perceptions and sense-making of a few, rather than trying to draw a nomothetic trend across a sample of the many. Rather than testing a pre-existing, deductive hypothesis, “a good case study usually either disconfirms our expectations, or reveals things that were not expected. Thus, the additional value of the case study is that it provides a means of troubling our assumptions, preconceptions and theories” (Smith et al, 2009, p. 30). Rather than showing *that* something is happening in general, the idiographic commitment to the particular can dive deeply into *why* that something is happening. Smith cautions, however, not to make that jump to generalization too soon; rather, we must draw everything we can from one case, then the next case, and the case after that, and only then move on to drawing conclusions or themes across those multiple cases.

**Rationale for IPA**

Because of the inherent tension captured within phenomenology, the experience of the phenomenon and the interpretation of that experience in order to make it mean, IPA is a rich approach for analyzing messy, personal, embodied, context-specific experiences. For these reasons, IPA offers a useful critical lens by which to gain a deeper understanding of how new college students understand their transition into the college environment; giving voice to the experiencer experiencing those situations we as practitioners take for granted opens up new
meaning and troubles our ways of conducting business-as-usual. As workplace practitioners, especially in higher education, we may dismiss those experiences as simple complaining, unappreciative whining, or disgruntled ax-grinding; as researchers, we must put aside our preconceptions and biases as much as possible and really listen to those representations in order to make new meaning about the familiar situation.

IPA is an especially appropriate research methodology when attempting to gain participants’ perceptions about their highly contextualized, highly personalized interactions with a new environment. Individual male students react to challenges and messages of exclusion in many different ways; some strive for success against all odds (Pérez & Taylor, 2016), some adopt an oppositional “prove them wrong” attitude (Wood & Palmer, 2015), and others enact hypermasculine overcompensation based in sexism, homophobia, and high-risk behaviors (Harris & Harper, 2008). Some decide that college was never right for them, or that other life demands are more pressing, and walk away. Through a carefully constructed IPA project, the researcher can gather individual working-class male student’s perceptions and meaning-making about the transition into the community college experience. Only by listening to individual students very carefully can we really learn how the students understand the new experience, how they cope with perceived challenges, and how they strive to achieve college success.

Participants

This study involved in-person, semi-structured interviews with seven working-class male students who had persisted into their second semester at a small, rural community college with a grade point average of 2.0 or higher. Because the researcher understands identity to be intersectional, there was no attempt to control the sample by race, ethnicity, or age (Wilkins, 2014). Two students were of traditional age (18-22), while five were non-traditional (ages 25-52). One student identified as African American; the other six identified as white.
The research site for this study was a small, rural, public community college in the Northeast region of the United States. Located in a small city that has some urban traits, the college’s service area is largely rural and somewhat sparsely populated. According to the college’s Fall 2017 Data Book, the college’s overall student population was 1,847 students, with 34% enrolled full-time (12 credits or more) and 66% enrolled part-time (less than 12 credits). The gender discrepancy was 62% female to 38% male, with a 50/50 split in age between traditional and non-traditional aged students. The site community college serves a large number of low-income students, with roughly 58% of the student population receiving the Pell grant.

**Sampling procedures**

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, or the practice of selecting participants that are able to speak to and inform the research question (Creswell, 2013). Purposive sampling is needed to produce a group of participants that have all experienced a particular phenomenon and is therefore a common practice within IPA research (Smith et al., 2009). After securing approval from the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of both the graduate program university (Northeastern University) and the site community college, the researcher recruited participants using the following steps:

1) At the end of the Fall 2017 semester the Office of Institutional Effectiveness at the site community college compiled a list of male, Pell-eligible students who entered the college in Fall 2017, had earned a grade point average of 2.0 or higher, and had enrolled in courses at the college for Spring 2018. To avoid potential bias, students who had previously had the researcher as a professor or advisor were excluded from the sample.

2) The researcher sent an initial recruitment email to all students on the list, briefly describing the study. Students who were interested in learning more about the study
were asked to respond to the researcher by email. A week later, a second recruitment email was sent to all students on the list who had not responded. The researcher replied via email to potential participants who responded to the personalized email. At this point the researcher also offered to arrange a preliminary meeting to provide an overview of the study, but only two participants asked for that first contact.

3) Due to lack of responses, the researcher posted informational posters around campus with a brief description of the project and contact information. The researcher also sent an email to professors at the college asking them to read a brief description of the project to their classes, with contact information. When potential participants still had not emerged, the researcher posted a second informational poster and sent a final request for participants to the original email list. While the researcher originally hoped to interview 8-10 students, he concluded recruitment when seven participants had been identified.

Procedures
The decision to use IPA as a methodology influenced each aspect of the research design, emphasizing the research participants’ meaning-making process of a major life event or phenomenon within their “lived world” (Smith et al., 2009). This study’s data collection and analysis procedures followed standard IPA research recommendations and are described in detail in the following sub-sections.

Data Collection and Analysis
The five-step process for collecting and analyzing data typical for IPA was utilized in this study (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher developed an interview schedule (see Appendix A) that was structured enough to guide the conversation but open-ended enough to allow participants the opportunity to share their experiences and perceptions in their own way (Smith et
al., 2009). After each participant signed the informed consent form, the researcher conducted an individual, semi-structured interview with each participant so that they could “be granted an opportunity to tell their stories, to speak freely and reflectively, and to develop their ideas and express their concerns at some length” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 56). The interaction of a face-to-face interview allowed the researcher to guide, probe, and ask follow up questions that other qualitative approaches, such as journaling, would not (Smith, 2004). While focus groups also would have allowed for the give-and-take of real-time questioning, this approach might introduce “pressures of group conformity” (Brocki & Weaden, 2006, p. 93), allowing one outspoken participant to shut down other members of the group. Individual interviews allowed each participant to share his perceptions without impacting other students’ contributions to the study.

In phase one, each participant was interviewed using the interview schedule. The interviews, which ran from 35-60 minutes in length, were conducted at a location of the participant’s choosing, such as local coffee shops. Several participants chose to be interviewed on-campus, but no interactions occurred within the researcher’s office in order to maintain a neutral space. Interviews were digitally recorded using two devices, with one serving as a backup in case the primary recording device failed. Participants were asked to share their perceptions and experiences related to their first semester at the community college, the expectations they had about college beforehand, the challenges and opportunities they had experienced, and their methods of dealing with those situations to achieve academic success. During the interview the researcher tried to be an active listener and ask probing follow up questions, while at the same time being careful to approach the interview material with “an open attitude, seeking what emerges as important” and “to let the interview breathe and speak for
itself” (Seidman, 2006, p. 117). Following each interview the researcher completed an analytic memo to capture initial thoughts and perceptions (Groenewald, 2008), which was incorporated into an ongoing research journal kept throughout the research process.

Each interview was transcribed by the researcher and analyzed according to the five-step analysis process consistent with IPA methodology (Smith et al., 2009). First, the researcher re-read and listened to the interview multiple times, in order to immerse himself in the participant’s “lived world” of the phenomenological experience. Second, each transcript was analyzed according to the process of “initial noting” in order to “identify specific ways by which the participant talks about, understands and thinks about an issue” (p. 83). After experimenting briefly with the NVivo computer system, the researcher decided to hand-note the transcripts using multiple ink colors to complete this overlapping and iterative task. By making descriptive comments, linguistic comments, and conceptual comments, the researcher engaged in a “Gadamerian dialogue” between his own pre-understandings and the “newly emerging understandings of the participant’s world” (p. 89). Next, emerging themes were identified in each interview, leading to the development of patterns across multiple cases. Only after analyzing each participant’s account of his experiences in deep, rich detail did the researcher move on to direct comparison to generate common themes. Finally, as a form of member checking, the researcher provided the interview transcript to the participant to confirm the validity of the researcher’s presentation of the material (Creswell, 2013; Shenton, 2004).

Once all interviews have been transcribed and analyzed as described above, the researcher generated a second interview schedule (see Appendix B) based on the common themes that emerged. He then interviewed each participant again to ask specific follow up questions that had arisen in the first interview, as well as the common concerns that emerged
across the group. This second round of interviews was recorded, transcribed, reviewed and hand-coded as described above. The transcripts of these second interviews were also shared with participants to confirm their validity. This two-interview process, which took nearly six months to complete, allowed a deeper, fuller picture of the students’ experiences to emerge, as well as serving as extensive member-checking of the material in the first interviews (Shenton, 2004).

During the latter stages of interview analysis, the researcher compared the participants’ experiences to each other and to the published literature on working-class and male student persistence and success. While IPA depends on inductive, open-ended exploration of the participants’ perceptions of their lived experience, Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006) emphasized that analysis is more than just transcribing and describing that experience: “IPA has been developed specifically in order to allow the researcher to produce a theoretical framework which is based upon, but which may transcend or exceed, the participants’ own terminology and conceptualizations” (p. 113-114). Because the researcher has other knowledge and expertise than the single person sharing the particular experience, the researcher can bring additional perspective to the analysis than the participant could himself. The danger is simply using the interviewee as a pretext to voice pre-existing theory. As Smith (2004) put it, “The participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world” (p. 40). Through that double hermeneutic, me watching me watching you watching you, a deeper, richer interpretation of the complex situation can be achieved.

**Ethical considerations**

Although it was unlikely that this study would cause any harm to participants, the researcher was mindful of several ethical issues throughout the research process. Beginning with receiving approval from the IRB of both the graduate program university (Northeastern
University) and the site community college, the researcher complied with all guidelines related to the protection of human subjects, including taking measures to ensure the anonymity of participants. All participants selected a pseudonym during the initial interview in order to protect their identity during the research process. All audio files, analytic memos, notes, and documents are stored electronically on the researcher’s personal computer and password-protected Google Drive space, with physical documents kept in a locked storage cabinet. Additionally, because the researcher is a professor at the site community college, he was highly aware of the power imbalances that could result during the data collection process. All participants were assured and reminded that they could withdraw from the interview process at any time; none chose to do so.

Just as importantly, the researcher actively sought to establish a safe, non-judgmental environment for participants as they shared their perceptions about the college experience. All too often, working-class male students can feel stigmatized and marginalized during their college experience. By enlisting Harper’s (2012) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework, the researcher placed the emphasis on students’ strengths, assets, and achievement rather than deficit-focused “lack” or weaknesses. This approach provided a constructive space in which students not only reflected on their experiences but reported feeling empowered by identifying their own role in achieving academic success.

**Credibility and trustworthiness of the study**

Tracy (2010) identified eight key criteria for ensuring the quality of qualitative research, including the worthiness of the topic, the level of rigor of the study, a sense of sincerity, and the resonance of the project. Smith et al. (2009) add “sensitivity to context” to that list. As a long-time community college practitioner, the researcher feels a deep sensitivity and connection to the context under study: the strategies utilized by working-class, male students to achieve academic success. Based on informal conversations over many years, he feels a strong sense of connection
to this material and a deep level of sincerity in learning more about these students’ experiences. Shenton (2004) also described a number of steps qualitative researchers can take to ensure the quality and trustworthiness of their study, including: adopting accepted research methods of published studies; establishing a strong sense of rapport and trust with the research participants; engaging in iterative questioning within and across interviews to draw out participants’ meaning; and, engaging in ongoing reflective commentary throughout the research process. Most importantly, Shenton (2004) identified the need to “ensure as far as possible that the work’s findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher” (p. 72).

The researcher strove to maintain high levels of credibility and trustworthiness throughout the research process. The protocol for IPA methodology was followed throughout, and qualitative studies focused on the college experiences of male students, especially men of color, provided high-quality models for the researcher to follow. Member-checking occurred during both the first and second rounds of interviewing, ensuring that the researcher presented the participants’ words and meaning accurately. Through this member-checking, analytic memoing, and keeping an ongoing research journal, the researcher made every effort to achieve a high level of credibility and quality in this qualitative project. In short, the researcher welcomed the opportunity to provide these students with the opportunity to share their voice and reflect with them on their experiences.

Potential researcher bias

In the field of educational research, bias can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, as Machi and McEvoy (2012) explained, passion and dedication to one’s perceptions based on professional experience can yield unique insights and commitment to tackle a problem others might not recognize. On the other, that passion can become bias that causes the researcher to
jump to premature conclusions based on preconceptions formed by that same professional experience. In short, as a researcher I must be continuously aware of my positionality, understanding how my complex identity construction could potentially bias my research efforts, in order to compensate for them. The same factors that make me passionate about the first-year experience in the community college environment for working-class male students could potentially lead to bias, and I must guard against those biases at every turn.

During the coursework of my scholar-practitioner doctoral program, I came to a realization that now seems strikingly obvious: I care about working-class, first-generation male students because I identify as one. I identify as a white, lower-middle-class male who works as a Professor of English at a small, rural community college. A first-generation student, I went to Colby College in Waterville, Maine thanks to a generous financial aid package and two parents who were willing to take out a second mortgage on their home. While my parents were not poor and we never went hungry, we certainly ate a lot of store-brand Cheerios, hot dogs, and pork and beans. Soria (2015) and Jehangir et al. (2015) explained that class identity is more than annual family income; it is better understood as “generational wealth.” While the family’s current income may be enough to keep it above the poverty line, ingrained habits and attitudes passed down from earlier generations can lead to class-based identity constructions. My maternal grandfather was a line worker for General Motors in Illinois. My paternal grandfather was a highway maintenance man for the state of Maine. In terms of class status, I sometimes think of myself as a “working-class kid made good.” Because my parents were willing to take out that second mortgage, because I tend to be scholarly and diligent by nature, and because I was able to form strong connections to certain parts of the college quickly due to my girlfriend’s presence on campus, I was able to survive and thrive at college. Indeed, I have never left. As I watch my
students struggle at the community college, however, I identify with their class-based struggles. As a practitioner, that makes me passionate to serve as an advocate for their success; as a researcher, however, it was a potential bias I strove to be constantly aware of as I designed and conducted my project. Because of my positionality, I tend to assume I know what these students are going through. I made every effort to guard against those assumptions to make sure that I did not project my own conception of working-class masculinity onto my research participants.

**Limitations**

There are two key limitations to this study. First, because the research participants were drawn from one community college in a relatively rural, Northeastern state, the results might not be generalizable to large community colleges in urban areas or in other regions of the United States. Hlinka (2017) notes that the *community* in community college includes important regional differences, cultures, and expectations about the college experience. There may be regional factors at play in this community-based sample that will go unexplored. Second, this study will concentrate on class-based identity rather than race-based identity issues, despite the fact that most literature on male student success issues agree that male students of color require the most intervention and support. The researcher has chosen to focus on class rather than race because of his own positionality and to address what he sees as a gap in the research. By focusing on working-class male students he does not in any way suggest they are more important or more in need of assistance than any other group. While arguing strongly for the need to improve professional development and application of institutional resources to help our male students, Harris and Edwards (2010) explicitly state that such efforts must never “detract attention and resources from the issues that challenge college women” (p. 59). The researcher couldn’t agree more.
Conclusion

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) allows the researcher to explore a small number of participants’ accounts of their experience in great depth. Designed to capture each participant’s voice and to represent both the interviewee’s sense-making and the interviewer’s analysis of the situation, IPA is committed to gaining a deeper understanding of how the experiencer experiences those situations and thereby opening up new meaning and troubling our ways of conducting business-as-usual. Larkin, Eatough and Osborn (2011) sum it up perfectly: “Whatever phenomenon is being studied, the aim is to understand ‘what it is like to be experiencing this, for this particular person, in this context’” (p. 330). As workplace practitioners, we must put aside our preconceptions and biases as much as possible and really listen to those representations in order to make new meaning about the familiar situation. College is supposed to expose students to new ways of thinking that challenge their pre-existing understanding of the world around them. Only by listening to individual students’ sense-making about their transition into the college can we really learn how they understand their new experience, how they react when faced with barriers and challenges, and how they strive to achieve college success.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into working-class male students’ perspectives of the first-year experience at a rural community college. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology was employed to explore their perceptions. By encouraging these students to share their experiences, patterns of meaning-making were identified that stress challenges to and strategies for achieving academic success. The analysis of the interview data yielded four themes and nine corresponding subthemes:

1. Anxiety During Transition to College
   1.1. Negative Work Experience as Push
   1.2. Anxiety During First College Contact
2. School/Work/Life Balance
   2.1. Financial Worries
   2.2. Family as Motivation/Support
3. Building Self-Efficacy to Achieve College Success
   3.1. “Survival Strategies” from Other Life Contexts
   3.2. Importance of Positive Institutional Agent
   3.3. Building Momentum/Sense of Belonging
4. Masculinity Issues
   4.1. Negative Experiences Based on Masculinity
   4.2. Awareness of Male Disengagement Issues

Table 1 provides a listing of the themes and subthemes that manifested through the analysis process as well as the recurrence of each theme across participants.
Table 1

Identification of Recurring Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>John</th>
<th>Dugan</th>
<th>Raymond</th>
<th>Lance</th>
<th>Ross</th>
<th>Jim</th>
<th>Xavier</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subthemes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Anxiety During Transition to College</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Negative Work Experience as Push</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Anxiety During First College Contact</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. School/Work/Life Balance</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Financial Worries</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Family as Motivation/Support</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Building Self-Efficacy to Achieve College Success</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 “Survival Strategies” from Other Life Contexts</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Importance of Positive Institutional Agent</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
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<td>3.3 Building Momentum/ Sense of Belonging</td>
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<td>4.1 Negative Experiences Based on Masculinity</td>
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Anxiety During Transition to College

Students who choose to attend community colleges come from a wide array of previous experiences; some come directly from high school, some use community colleges to re-enter higher education after negative four-year college experiences, and many return after an extended period in the world of work. All seven participants regarded community college as a positive step toward pursuing their career goals and improving their lives. Two participants, Jim and Dugan, transitioned to community college directly from high school and felt little anxiety, regarding it as simply a cost-effective next step in their life journey. For the other five participants, however, the transition into community college was much less clear cut.

The first theme that emerged captures the participants’ anxiety during the transition into the community college. The researcher found two specific areas of convergence across participants related to this anxiety. Five participants had negative experiences at work that made them feel undervalued and disrespected, leading them to take the plunge into community college. Four of these participants reported feeling overwhelmed by their lack of familiarity with college culture and the “fear of failure” as they began their journey. Thus, the two subthemes discussed here are: Negative Work Experience as Push and Anxiety During First College Contact.

Negative Work Experience as Push

The participants viewed community college as a gateway to a better life, in part because each of them had experienced low-paying jobs in which they felt ignored, undervalued, and disrespected. Ross reported that he was going to quit his low-paying, overly stressful job at a highway rest stop convenience station on the same day as his first interview: “I really just don’t like doing that kind of work, that I’m a lot smarter and a lot more valuable than that. So, I figured I would come back to community college and pursue an education.” Because no one
would come to work on time, including his boss, Ross was often stuck at work until the wee
hours of the morning:

   Because unfortunately, being the shift supervisor, I’m the one who gets stuck. *(laughs)*
   Rain, sleet, snow, shutdown by the state, I’m still at work…. I have coworkers who are
   chronically late, so I don’t get home until chronically late, and then I’m working on four
   hours of sleep that day. So that’s part of the difficulty, and I’ve developed a really bad
   caffeine addiction at this point. *(both laugh)*

Rather than continuing in this negative work environment, Ross decided to pursue a job in which
he could feel more valued: “I’m tired of getting paid dirt, being treated like dirt, and not getting
any respect from my boss, coworkers, company, whatever. The problems at work clearly affect
my schoolwork, and I’m prioritizing that.” By the time of the second interview Ross had quit this
job and gotten a new job at a local bank. As he summed it up, “I preserve a lot of sanity working
here.” This sense of increased calm and the validation he felt in his community college
experience put Ross back on the path to earning his degree and pursuing the higher standard of
living that remains his goal.

   Raymond’s workplace experience as a housepainter is remarkably similar. Raymond
described the moment that made him decide it was time to go to college:

   The last person I worked for, I was on a ladder and it was an unsafe ladder, and I wanted
to fix it to make it safe, and the boss told me I couldn’t fix it, that it was like that for X
amount of years. And I said, no, it’s not safe. So I took the ladder to show him it wasn’t
safe, and basically he fired me. So I said, I’m sick of working for these people who are
treating me like I’m nothing, you know what I mean?
Raymond had experienced similar disrespect from his bosses throughout his fifteen years as a housepainter, but he described this event as “the edge”: “I said I’m going back to school and do something with my life.” This negative experience propelled Raymond into taking the first step to pursue his dream of becoming an art teacher:

I’m smart enough to go and get an education and do something with myself, and I’m talented enough as an artist where I can go for art and maybe become a teacher some day, or something. Do something besides paint houses that I won’t be able to do when I’m like 55 or 60. I’m not going to want to do that. I want to have something solid, something where I’m helping other people do something with themselves. Inspiring them, helping them do something creative—that’s what I want to do.

Pushed past “the edge” by this negative encounter, Raymond now feels motivated to pursue college as his pathway to improving his life.

Much like Raymond, Lance’s decision to leave his job as a night manager at a Dunkin Donuts to pursue his dream of becoming a registered nurse was partially determined by the negativity of his boss: “My boss didn’t appreciate me. I never missed a day of work, I was never late, I’m OCD when it comes to food, but he was just being a pain. But I thank him, because if he wasn’t so rude and nasty to me, I might not have stepped out and decided to go to school. I might still be like, ‘can I take your order?’” Lance reported that he still receives requests to return to the job he left: “They’re driving me crazy. They keep calling me up and asking me if I want to come back to work. I quit a year and a half ago. They keep calling me and asking if I want my job back. But I see that as going backwards.” Rather than returning to that job, Lance has completely committed to earning his degree: “right now, this is my bread and butter.”
For John, negative work experiences and other real-life difficulties led him to pursue community college as a last resort:

I’d been working, like, under the table, doing stuff, nothing full time, and then a few years ago I herniated a couple disks in my back. So, basically what prompted me to go back to school was, I wanted to do something while I was doing nothing. And maybe use my brains instead of using, you know, something physical…. I wasn’t doing anything, to be totally honest with you. I was literally not really doing anything. My life, it was *(pause)* I had to do something, basically. *(laughs)* It was like the last thing, at least in my situation.

For John, community college is a positive step in pursuing a more satisfying life. He wasn’t exactly sure what he wanted to pursue or how college would help, but much like Lance and Raymond, he felt it could be a step in the right direction. As these working-class men took that first step onto the college campus, however, they each experienced a high degree of anxiety that nearly derailed their college experience before it even began.

**Anxiety During First College Contact**

While the participants all identified community college as a positive step toward improving their circumstances, four of them reported feeling a high level of anxiety based on lack of familiarity with college processes, environment, and expectations. Xavier, a non-traditional student in his early 40s, explained that he had a “fear of failure” that had long kept him from pursuing a college degree: “One of the reasons I hadn’t gone had to do with my fear, or anxiety. Fear of failure, I suppose, of putting all my time and energy and money into a goal and the fear of not making it.” Xavier had served in the military, worked at construction sites as a translator and site manager, and worked at several residential educational facilities before becoming a paraprofessional helping special needs children in a local school district. Looking
back at his long work history, he felt his fear of failure had led to an unfulfilling life experience so far: “I basically just had to navigate life as things were hurled at me. I had more reaction and survival instincts than goals to pursue. And with not having the self-confidence to want to do better, you basically had to hit rock bottom to realize I have to go up.” Now, with a supportive fiancée and a newborn son, Xavier is willing to face that fear of failure in order to take the next step forward:

    So, that’s really the ultimate goal, I would say, is my son. That’s really what is driving me and allowing me to not have the fear to fail. And my mindset was wrong. As I’ve learned, even now currently we’re doing about failure in my English course, that you will fail and it’s normal to fail, and without failure you really can’t succeed. So, I’m ready to fail in order to succeed.

Xavier reported that he now feels he has hit his stride. Earning strong grades in his first semester “gave me the confidence, and now I’m getting the credentials. Every time I pass a course I’m one step closer to saying, yeah, not only do I know what I’m doing, I can tell you that I know what I’m doing. I have the piece of paper right here.” Because of this newfound positive mindset and the positive interaction he has enjoyed with his professors, Xavier is able to reflect on the fear of failure that kept him from pursuing college for so long. As Raymond and Lance’s experiences show, some working-class males come perilously close to never beginning that journey at all.

    Once Raymond had his “edge” moment with his bad painting boss, he knew he wanted to go to community college and pursue his passion, art. His mother had gone to the same community college, and so had his best friend. Watching those role models, he knew that community college was a viable path forward:
I’ve heard a lot of good things about [this community college]. It seems like a good school to help people start who don’t have much. Like my mom didn’t have anything. People who don’t have much have become pretty successful going to [this community college], so I always wanted to experience it too.

How to put that plan into action, however, was less clear to him. Raymond described being completely unfamiliar with the college application process and finding the initial experience overwhelming:

I was nervous at first, for sure. Very nervous. I was scared. The first thing I did was, I just went in there and asked for help. I went right to the administration office and said, “I don’t really know what I’m doing, I want to come back to school, I don’t know who to talk to or where to go. Can somebody help me?” And they looked at me funny, kinda, and said, did you fill out an application online? I said no, I didn’t know there’s an application online. And they said, did you take the Accuplacer test? I said no, that’s what I’m trying to say. I don’t really know how to start. And they said, oh, okay, we can help you out. And they took me right through the whole process and got me enrolled.

Here, Raymond reflects on the how daunting his initial point of contact with the college was for him. Luckily, the admissions staff helped him to feel supported: “They were able to take the anxiousness I was feeling and helped me relax a little bit. They let me know there were people there to help, that I wasn’t going to be on my own trying to figure this out.” For Raymond, this sense of a welcoming presence, someone who could help him to enter the mysterious labyrinth of the college experience, was extremely important. Having seen his mother and his friend go through the same community college, he knew it was worth battling through that initial level of
anxiety and discomfort. For Lance, that sense of discomfort almost led him to give up on his dream before it even began.

Lance, an African American, non-traditional student in his 50s who describes himself as being decades older than most of his classmates, has had an especially challenging life experience. He disclosed that he has been HIV positive for over 30 years and in recovery for drug addiction for seven years. As part of his recovery process, however, he made the commitment to pursue community college to achieve his goal, becoming a registered nurse. As he took that first step, his sense of anxiety and disorientation was acute:

Because I seemed like I was wandering back and forth down the hallway aimlessly, and I was like \( \textit{sighs} \). And I kind of wanted to give up, because when you start a new project, something of this magnitude, it’s already nerve wracking… It was so overwhelming, and I was like, this is just too much. And I was walking back and forth, back and forth, and all these little papers I needed to sign. And I was like, \( \textit{changes voice} \) “you know what? Social Security isn’t that bad.” My disease started talking to me, my disease of addiction. \( \textit{whispers} \) “Social Security’s not that bad.” But I was like, yes it is. When I was in active addiction I didn’t really have want for anything, but now that I’ve been clean and serene going on seven years, I want more.

As Lance told this story, he gave credit to a college advisor who helped him through the process:

I’ll tell you the most wonderful thing that happened to me when I walked through those doors, because I was lost and confused, and it was terrifying really. I can’t remember her name, but she sits in the office right next to the student advising office. A lady with dark hair. She came out of her seat, came out of her office, and asked if she could be of some assistance. That was so warm and welcoming into the school. And she made me feel at
home, welcoming, and directed me to the places I needed to go. And for that she earned four stars.

During his interviews Lance proved himself to be a natural storyteller, changing his voice and clapping his hands at key moments to emphasize his points. As his first interview made crystal clear, this institutional agent saved him from giving up: “if she did not stop me and ask if she could be of assistance, I might not even be here today.” Lance’s experience demonstrates the key point that one well-informed and well-meaning person at the college can make all the difference.

John’s turbulent college transition serves as a final example of this trend. John explained that his girlfriend works at an adult basic education organization with ties to the community college, so she helped him to enroll. John described his transition into the college as a whirlwind that left him feeling overwhelmed:

I was excited. (laughs) Okay, when we were talking about me going back to school, I was like, yeah, yeah, yeah. And she really got it going. And it was really quick, and she was like, boom, you’ve got class. And I was like, holy crap, I’ve got classes now. You know, maybe the first month, I was having really bad anxiety. Like, I thought I was having a stroke or a heart attack or something. (laughs) It was like, I don’t know if I can do this.

In his second interview John expanded on that feeling of anxiety while also crediting his girlfriend with helping him through this transition:

Just doing something new and getting back to it, because I didn’t know what I was doing, in a way…. We had to write an essay and I was so panicked, I didn’t even know. I was like, what do I write? I didn’t know the process. I just didn’t get it, and I remember I was sitting in my house and I got so mad I ripped the book, I was like (acts out ripping the book). She helped me a lot. She was like, “You’ve got to calm down” and blah blah blah.
Now that he has made it through this turbulent transitional period, John has begun to experience success and increase his sense of self-confidence. He measures that sense of progress by not relying so much on his girlfriend’s help: “Now she doesn’t even have to help me, and she’s like, wow. And that started third semester, I started not needing her help. And I was like, I’m good. And if I ever needed help, I’d get it.” John’s girlfriend has served him as a knowledgeable institutional insider, someone who knows how to navigate the college landscape and who can help him to achieve academic success. Without that support, however, he may not have been able to overcome the initial feelings of panic to reach his current level of success.

Conclusions
Like many working-class students, these participants knew that attending community college could be their first step in pursuing a more satisfying career and attaining a higher standard of living. Already extremely familiar with the real-world demands of low-pay, low-satisfaction jobs, they were primed and excited to jump into a new experience. Even after they had made that first step to pursue college, however, they still needed the intervention of a knowledgeable, approachable, and kind institutional insider to help get them over the hump. For John, it was his girlfriend; for Lance, it was the “lady with dark hair” who went out of her way to make him feel welcome. By providing that helping hand to overcome the initial sense of disorientation and bewilderment, these institutional agents were able to keep these working-class male students on track to begin their college experience. Without that moment of assistance, it is hard to say whether or not they would have continued on their college journey.

School/Work/Life Balance
Faced with increasingly demanding academics while also dealing with the hassle of commuting, work, family, and other parts of their complex lives, the participants all felt the stress created by trying to achieve a school/work/life balance that would allow them to thrive, or
even survive. All seven participants noted their financial concerns about the cost of their education, the difficulty of making financial ends meet, and their long-term concerns of finding a better-paying job at the end of their college careers. As Xavier noted for the group, college is perceived as a gamble that might not pay off, even if they do everything right along the way. That stress is offset to some extent by a strong sense of motivation provided by their family and friends. While supporting a family served as a source of stress for several participants, all seven noted family support and family role models as effective sources of motivation to push through the tough times and continue on their college journey. To capture these insights, this section will focus on the two subthemes: Financial Worries and Family as Motivation/Support.

**Financial Worries**

When the participants discuss college as the first step to a better life, they are usually focused on the financial aspects of that life. For Jim and Dugan, the two traditional-aged students who had relatively smooth transitions into the community college, college is seen as an economic transaction that may or may not pay off. Jim emphasized his father’s financial understanding about choosing to go to college: “He didn’t go to college and my mom didn’t go to college, and he really pushed me and my older brother, you know, to make that decision. He wants us to have as many opportunities as we can have.” Jim refers to the “cost to class ratio” to capture the value of the college experience. For Dugan, the community college choice was even more financial:

I decided to attend this community college in particular because it’s local, it’s easy to get to, it doesn’t break the bank, really…. Because my sister went to college and she broke her bank on it. She went to [private four-year college] for soccer, she was big into soccer. They picked her up for that, and she hated it because they owned her life. So, she did that and got out of there and went to [state university], got some degree in something.
psychological. Then she was like, “I don’t want to work with crazy people” and ended up doing something for teaching. So now she’s a teacher. But she went a whole roundabout way and my parents were just like, pick something and stick to it. And that’s kind of how I do everything.

Here, Dugan describes his sister’s negative and expensive college experience to emphasize the importance of efficiency as he pursues his career goal, becoming a police officer. He also noted that the officers he knows stress the financial value of college: “They’re great people. And a lot of them do want you to go to college. They’re like, (whispers) ‘Go to college, you get more money.’ (laughs).” For Dugan and Jim, the costs of college are at the forefront of their minds. For the nontraditional participants, those financial aspects are even more magnified.

Ross was extremely worried about the financial costs of college, emphasizing the work part of the work/school interface. His primary reason for choosing the community college was “mostly that I could still work while going here.” Even though he hated his convenience store job, Ross had to maintain employment to meet his financial obligations. That to him was the main aspect of the working-class identity:

I would define [working-class] as anybody who, to an extent, has a mid-to-low-paying job, I would say. Something that doesn’t have a lot of growth opportunity. So like, my previous job was convenience store work…. It doesn’t take a lot of skills, and management skills are mostly learned through years of experience of dealing with people.

So I would consider those people working-class. Especially very low-wage workers.

Ross considered his new bank job an improvement because it was much less stress for more pay. Still, financial concerns continued to limit educational opportunity:
A lot of my classes are only offered when I have to be at work, so I’ll have to find ways, whether it’s looking at a different community college, or seeing what I can take online through the [state university] system, I’m going to have to find ways to get those courses done…. So I’ll have to look at that, probably in July when they really want the money for the classes I sign up for.

While Ross was proactive in changing one job for a better opportunity, he remains reactive in his college pathway. He continues to prioritize making money in the here and now over taking the courses required to complete his college degree.

For Xavier, with a fiancée and a newborn child, those financial concerns are even more acute. He describes his previous work experiences as “working so hard but getting nowhere”:

You find yourself with the most basic of jobs you may be able to do in retail, sales, and marketing for telephone calls and calling families at 6:00 that just hang up on you. So, not rewarding work that didn’t give you any self-worth, that didn’t reflect much in your pay, so you go nowhere.

Now, as he pursues his Associate’s degree, he feels he must guard his time and his money. When credits from a previous community college did not transfer correctly, Xavier made sure he got those credits: “So in one fell swoop and a very easy advocating for myself and saying can we review this, I have now gotten 11 more credits toward my degree. So I saved myself a lot of time, money and heartache.” Here, he insists that seemingly simple things like transferring credits is “crucially a problem with the system now” that can cause unintentional barriers to success: “I mean, if I hadn’t looked into it I could have found myself having to work harder and taking a class I don’t need.” If Xavier hadn’t recognized this flaw in the system and taken steps to rectify it, he would have had to spend extra time and money, two resources he simply cannot
afford to waste. Similarly, he is worried that the courses he needs to complete his degree will not be available when he needs to take them. As an elementary education major, he will need to spend time student teaching, which could interfere with his paying job as a paraprofessional: “in the long term it’s going to be okay, but in the short term, that could make or break me.” He reported feeling caught between earning money in the here-and-now to support his family while also earning his degree to improve his career possibilities in the future: “I don’t want to be forced to quit my job in order to pursue my career through academics, because I have to support my family. It’s not a viable option.” He refers to this fear as a “gamble”:

It’s terrible—you say, you may have to quit your job to get ahead. Whoever would have thought you work so hard to get somewhere and then you have to gamble at losing it all to get ahead. That shouldn’t even be an option on the table for any American citizen.… It’s called the American Dream because the only time you can have it is when you’re asleep. (laughs)

Here, Xavier reveals a sense of anxiety trending into cynicism that was common for all of the participants. Even though they saw college as a positive step and a risk worth pursuing, they definitely viewed it as a gamble that might not ultimately pay off.

**Family as Motivation and Support**

For four of the seven participants, family members serve as both a source of motivation and as positive role models to pursue college. For Jim, a first-generation student, his parents serve as motivators and cheerleaders, pushing him to pursue college as the key to attaining a better life. Although his parents cannot draw on personal experience to serve as role models, Jim has found a role model close to home—his girlfriend’s father:

I think my girlfriend’s dad was a big role model. He was also pretty poor like my family is when he was younger, and he got kicked out of his house at 16. So, he got his degree
here at [this community college], and when he graduated and moved on to another school he couldn’t afford it and dropped out. So all he had was his Associate’s degree, and he ended up being very successful. He didn’t become an engineer, but he said the education really helped him think. He said it was really important to him.

Jim noted that his girlfriend’s father now owns a renewable energy company, which is the career field Jim wants to pursue. Here, Jim explains what was motivating about his girlfriend’s father’s educational experience: “All the hard work that he put in paying off. He really pulled himself up by his own bootstraps, and I’m hoping that’s something I’ll be able to do.” Jim sees this older role model who has led a similar life as evidence that community college can lead to a financially rewarding lifestyle. With this strong support network in place, Jim feels he is well on the way to achieving success.

Ross’s family dynamic is much more complex. He disclosed that both of his parents suffer from serious mental health issues: his mother battles with depression and bipolar disorder, while his father has multiple personality disorder. It was through this chaotic home life, however, that Ross was able to begin his journey toward college. His mother heard about a private college prep school that focuses on the needs of working-class students through one of her nurses. That institution provided him with a more stable situation as well as rigorous college preparatory work habits and strategies. Witnessing his parents’ struggles also aided Ross when he began to battle with depression himself. Jokingly, he defined college success as “Surviving college and not going insane while doing it. (laughs) There’s no point going down a road if by the end of the road you’re a personal wreck too.” While he said this as a joke, the interviewer asked him how he cultivated that sense of personal well being. Ross explained, “I go to my doctor when I’ve got an issue. I don’t ignore my health problems. I make sure that when I’m feeling stressed or
something like that, I talk about it with people I trust. I work my way through it.” Ross had tried to get help from the counseling service at his four-year college when he found himself battling with depression after his grandfather passed away, but unfortunately the services were lacking and his situation got worse:

I was trying to get appointments with the on-campus health and professional services there, and work through my depression and stuff, but they just wanted to say I had anxiety and give me a drug to get me out the door. It’s like, all I want to do, people, is talk. Because sometimes you do feel a lot better, you know, if you just talk about it.

That’s what they’re there for, but that’s what they didn’t want to do. (laughs)

Here, it is clear Ross knew what help he needed, but the lack of responsiveness by the college drove him away. Things got worse from there: “I tried going to the community college out there for a semester, but it didn’t really work out well because I was in a funk over everything…. And at that point I had just given up.” That feeling of “giving up” led Ross to the convenience store job he hated so much, but now he has enrolled in the site community college and finds its student services to be much more responsive. Reflecting on his earlier experiences, Ross now attributes his ability to achieve success in part to his willingness to ask for help:

But for somebody like me, it’s like I don’t care if I’m somebody else’s problem, I’ll just go be somebody else’s problem. (laughs) Like, hi, I don’t get this, please show me what’s going on. But I would say that comes from my experience personally with college in the past and whatnot, and my willingness, to some extent, as much as I hate to, admit that I was wrong, or I don’t get it.

While Ross did not state the connection directly, that willingness to be counseled may come in part from watching his parents’ interaction with caregivers in his childhood.
For Xavier, four family influences are extremely important in terms of providing motivation and support: his son, his fiancée, his stepfather, and his mother. Xavier draws his main source of motivation and inspiration from his son: “I want to guide him through the world, and the fruits of my labor will now be passed on to him. So, that’s really the ultimate goal, I would say, is my son.” As he works toward earning his degree so he can provide for his son, his fiancée provides crucial emotional and financial support, especially when work, school and family come into direct conflict for his time:

It’s like, “oh, the baby’s crying, I’m going to have to leave the house, oh I can’t be feeling like I’m abandoning my family, I guess Mom is going to have to take care of it.”… She’s very supportive, she’s a college graduate, so she understands the process. So I have the support system that I’ve always needed.

As he faces these competing demands on his time, Xavier identifies his stepfather, who also earned his degree from this same community college, as a strong role model: “I definitely think that my father being later in life, basically at this point in my life is at the same point in time when he was doing it as well, with an extended family because we’re a blended family too. So I know it’s possible.” Interestingly, however, his mother’s somewhat negative experience may be the most relevant push toward fulfilling his mission to earn his college degree. Xavier’s mother has worked as an ESOL teacher in a local school district for thirty years, and she opened the door for him to get his job as a paraprofessional in the same school district. However, the complex situation she faces as a teacher who never earned a college degree serves as an example of what he needs to avoid:

Now, at this point she’s still having trouble with it because when you don’t have an accolade that is supposed to be per law, people get jealous and there’s a lot of that human
aspect there. So I can see the struggle on that end, and that’s her support. “If I were able or capable of doing that thirty years ago, I would have been better off and I wouldn’t be dealing with these things. Don’t you go do what I just did.”

Seeing firsthand what his mother has experienced—and having her tell him exactly what not to do—has been a strong motivator for Xavier. As he put it, “I’m not going to be the work horse that could be easily expendable.” Wanting to avoid his mother’s situation, wanting to be a good provider for his son, and enjoying his fiancée’s support, Xavier has a strong sense of motivation and positive role models to help in his college journey.

Like Jim, Ross, and Xavier, Lance draws a tremendous amount of support from his parents, even though he is now in his 50s. Lance’s decision to become a nurse came in part from watching his father’s nurses at the end of his life. His father’s passing was devastating for Lance and knocked him off track: “I was grieving, and I’m a daddy’s boy. Anybody who knows me knows I’m a daddy’s boy. It knocked the hell out of me.” Though his father has passed away, Lance still draws motivation from what his father would say to him if he were still alive:

And when I was falling behind my teacher was saying, don’t worry about it, but I was like, no, I need to do this. I could hear my dad’s voice saying, (changes voice) “Don’t be using me as an excuse for you failing your classes. I’m gonna be looking down at you.”

And I would joke at him, ‘What makes you think you’re going upstairs, big man?’

(laughs)

This powerful and ongoing relationship with his father continues to motivate Lance, as does his relationship with his mother. Lance described how his mother’s faith in him helps him to overcome moments of self-doubt and stay focused on his goals: “My mom is already calling me Nurse Lance. She’s been calling me Nurse Lance since the first semester. So I have her support.”
That sense of unwavering support from his parents helps him to maintain his confidence and his own sense of pride in his achievement: “they support and they’re proud of me. And I’m proud of me too. I got off drugs, I found a new way to live, and I respect it, and I’m a productive member of society.” Here, Lance reflects on the ways the love, support, and positive guidance of these powerful figures have empowered him to progress farther than he ever imagined he could.

Conclusions
The difficulty of managing the school/work/life balance is a major concern for these working-class male students. Caught between the financial realities of paying for themselves and their families while also learning how to deal with increasing academic demands of more challenging courses, these students feel the stress of their competing roles. These students feel what Xavier called “the gamble” of putting in all this time, work and money into a degree they may not be able to complete for a future career that might not pan out. Still, these students find ways to remain motivated, drawing on the support of family and friends to keep themselves on track. For Jim, his girlfriend’s father is an object lesson in how to escape poverty with only an Associate’s degree. For Xavier, his mother serves as both his entry point into the field of education and an example of why earning the necessary credentials is absolutely crucial to maintain the level of security he is working so hard to achieve. This strong sense of determination despite the difficulty of the task, despite the anxiety of unfamiliarity with the college experience, shows the strong sense of motivation these working-class male community college students share. In order to turn that sense of motivation and determination into successful striving, each participant has developed key strategies to build a strong sense of self-efficacy to make the most of their time in the college environment.
Building Self-Efficacy to Achieve College Success

One key theme that emerged across all interview participants was the importance of building a sense of self-efficacy, positive momentum, and pride in their ability to achieve college success. For these seven working-class male students, success begets success. For five of the participants, drawing on “survival skills” from other parts of their lives helped them to achieve success in their college work. All seven found a valuable institutional agent who helped them navigate difficult moments and made them feel they could do it. Several of them mentioned that they have now built a sense of positive momentum and a sense of belonging—the feeling that they had “figured it out” and were now moving in the right direction. Thus the subthemes discussed here are: “Survival Strategies” from Other Life Contexts, Importance of Positive Institutional Agent, and Building Momentum/Sense of Belonging.

“Survival Skills” from Other Life Contexts

During the first round of interviews, it was striking how complex these male students’ lives had been and how they incorporated strategies from other parts of their lives into their college experience. Dugan described applying effective time management techniques he had learned at work and through competitive shooting competitions: “Other contexts, just doing other types of work, not school work. Setting aside a certain amount of time to do something, no matter how little, and get it done. And eventually it will translate to bigger and bigger amounts of time to get the whole thing done.” His idea of success also comes from his shooting competitions:

A lot of people in my sport, and it translates over to pretty much anything in life, compare themselves and their own abilities to other people and they want to do better than other people, and they want to see other people do worse than them. Everything you
need to do is just, beat yourself every time. Strive to do as good as you can, don’t compare your self-worth to other people.

When the researcher compared time management skills he had learned in his shooting competitions to his school work, Dugan said he had never noticed the connection before:

Oh, yeah. I didn’t even think about that. I just do that, but that’s something I learned at an early age because I had to, to get my life organized. That might not work for everybody, but it helped me here. I just kind of automatically applied it here because it’s how I run the rest of my life too.

Based on his upbringing and the way he leads his life, Dugan doesn’t even realize why he is taking the approach he takes. He just does what he does because that’s the way he was taught to do it. However, Dugan’s experience demonstrates how strengths learned in other parts of life can result in his sense of student success.

Raymond’s pathway to college has been especially challenging. He described how his father’s drug use and drug dealing led to a broken home, his own experimentation with drugs, and his eventual jail time for drug charges. Raymond was in prison when his still-incarcerated father passed away: “I got emergency furlough to go visit my dad on life support. I was in shackles, and he was on life support shackled to the bed and machines keeping him alive. He was in a coma when they told me, but he came out of his coma and we were able to talk a little bit.”

However, Raymond credits his father with introducing him to the desire to be a great artist:

Well, I watched my father make artwork, so I’ve always been inspired to want to be an artist. I’ve always been a creative person. I guess you could say he kind of groomed me to be an artist. He led me in that direction and showed me the steps I needed to take if I wanted to do that with my life.
Despite the difficulties caused by drug use, drug dealing, and prison, Raymond credits his father with being the first to “groom” him into becoming an artist. He remembers his father fondly and appreciates what he did for him.

Drawing and art have been a crucial part of Raymond’s experience. Indeed, Raymond perceives his time in prison as an important opportunity to hone and develop his craft:

I knew how to draw really good because I started going to jail…. Back when I was a kid, my dad was always having me draw stuff, teaching me how to be an artist. And I remembered all that, so when I was in jail and saw I could make money making cards, I was like, I’m going to do it. My first year and a half in County, for shoplifting, I sat there and had plenty of time to practice. I got good at drawing roses, with banners, and names and ribbons. You know, all that cliché jail art. I was great at drawing that.

When he went back to jail on a more serious drug offense, he continued to make strides in his artwork:

Upstate was a whole different caliber of art, because in county jail you just had little rubber pens and that’s all you could use. Can’t use pencils, can’t use nothing else…. But upstate you have pencils now, and other things like erasers, and art class, and all this other stuff. So now I started doing portraits, and way more detailed stuff. So I did three years practicing drawing up there.

Reflecting on his earlier experiences, Raymond credits his time in prison as an important period for preparing him to do well in college:

When I was in jail, like I said I did a lot of time in my younger years in jail, I read a lot. I probably read over a thousand books. Like, all kinds of stuff, from Kerouac, Ginsberg, to psychology, college books. I was reading everything from George Orwell to Bradbury,
everything, different authors. I devoured information. I drew and devoured information. It was almost like I was grooming myself for a college education at that point and I didn’t even realize it.

Noticeably, Raymond uses the key word “groom” to capture the value of these earlier experiences. By combining the commitment to art he learned from his father, the artistic skills and love of learning he developed in prison, and the work ethic he learned while working as a housepainter for fifteen long years, Raymond has learned valuable “survival skills” that have prepared him extremely well for his college experience.

Much like Raymond, Lance’s earlier experiences with drugs led him on a circuitous path to college. Lance explained Narcotics Anonymous and the process of recovery: “NA talks about recovery. Recover—you don’t ever recover, but you stay in a process of recovering. And I want some of the old Lance back, being a productive member of society, and I needed a change.” Lance gained some of the confidence to make that change while organizing a large NA convention. His success with planning and organizing the event helped him to realize he was ready to give school a shot. Lance made a direct connection between his college success strategies and his NA success strategies:

You know, you find out who is the smartest person in the classroom, who’s raising their hand, and you get chummy chummy with them! (both laugh) Like in A&P, there are a couple of people who are smart, when they take their quiz or test you see what kind of grade they’re getting, and then you fall in line and ask them questions like, what type of study habit do you have? or do you want to do a group study to prepare for the next quiz? Just like in Narcotics Anonymous, right? Finding a sponsor, or people for your network who help you stay clean. You find out who’s serious, what they’re doing to stay clean,
and you hang out with them to be successful. So, I have a sponsor, and he’s been the same sponsor going on 7 years, and I emulate the same things he does—not quite the same, because I’m my own person, but I find out how he stayed clean through adversity, through divorces, through death, through all of those, to make me successful so when I go through it, like with my dad, how not to use during crisis. So those are my survival skills I bring into the school.

As Lance explains here, the lessons learned in his NA recovery are invaluable survival skills in college and his life as a whole. He learned how to commit to his recovery and his school work, how to model his behavior on positive role models, and how to ask for help when he needs it most. These survival skills learned in a much different part of his life have become his strategies for achieving college success.

As these participants’ experiences show, one key aspect of fighting their way through the unfamiliar landscape of college is to use strategies they have learned in the other parts of their challenging, complex lives. When the interviewer asked Raymond to describe a challenge he faced in his first semester at the college, he replied that “It’s hard to think of too much that’s been a challenge, you know what I mean? My life has been a challenge…. School has been a blessing.” Sometimes, however, those strategies learned in other contexts do not work well. If a student feels he “must do it for himself” and those strategies do not help, then he may find himself even more discouraged. At those moments having a knowledgeable insider, a caring institutional agent, can help these students to stay on track.

**Importance of Positive Institutional Agent**

Several of the participants reported feeling that they must figure things out for themselves; as Xavier put it, “no one is holding your hand through this process.” While they do
not expect anything to be handed to them, they do acknowledge that having a helping hand can be very useful. From the smoothest to the bumpiest transitions into the community college, all seven participants shared one common element: a positive faculty member or support staff person who helped them to navigate the college environment.

Dugan, Xavier, and Jim all note how important their professors have been in their college careers so far. For Dugan, his criminal justice professors have been exceptionally helpful based on the clarity of their expectations, their career experiences, and their guidance:

All the professors who do the criminal justice program definitely have been [positive and supportive], because they want to guide you towards your path. They’re really dedicated to making sure you get the help you need. They outline what they think is going to help you most, and they’re awesome people. Like, [professor names] were awesome in telling how it was like, how the world is and what you can do in your job. And not even just police work because they cover all aspects of the criminal justice system. So many of them are former police officers, it’s awesome…. They really do help guide you, they just dig it.

Xavier has had similar positive experiences with one of his Elementary Education professors:

I think she’s a wonderful person and does a great job. Very caring, very knowledgeable in the field as well. Very welcoming and inviting and allows everyone to express what they need to. And not laborious in the end of having to write papers. It’s more hands-on, because this is the foundations of your character as a teacher, you know, how to approach it and understand what you’re getting in to.

Because Xavier already works in the field of education as a paraprofessional, a number of his coworkers have also been able to serve as “informational insiders” for him:
Being in the field, I started researching and I had people saying to me, the directors said, “hey, do you know that if you go through the DoE website you can find all kinds of information? It’s a nightmare to navigate, but you may find a job.” Or, “Oh, there’s a paraprofessional grant and loan. You’re in the field. If you’ve completed two years you can get… If you go to college, pass, become a teacher, go to a needy school, you don’t have to pay for any of that college.” … So it was like, that might not be feasible for me, but good to know it’s there.

Together, Dugan and Xavier show how the combination of caring, supportive faculty and informational insiders helped to guide them on their pathway and stay on track.

Jim identified two important institutional agents who have helped him to achieve college success, one in high school and one at the community college. When asked how and where he learned the skills that have allowed him to be successful in college, he gave credit to his high school Advanced Placement English teacher: “He was very interested in teaching us better ways to think, and better ways to deal with problems, more than just teaching us how to write a five paragraph essay quickly. And that’s what I found to be important here at school.” Jim had similar praise for his engineering professor and the way he set up his Introduction to Engineering course as an applied, program-specific First-Year Experience course:

I think that was definitely something that helped me a lot. We spent time, like I said, working on time management techniques. We wrote resumes and cover letters. We learned more about what engineering is. We learned about what we would be spending our time doing, not just in that class but in all of the classes through graduation. I think that Intro class was something that could be useful for any person going into any program.
Through the guidance of these helpful faculty members, Jim, Dugan and Xavier were able to feel more informed, better equipped, and more welcome as they began their journey through the college experience.

While Raymond has had positive interactions with all of his professors, his Art professor has had the greatest impact as an institutional agent and role model: “She helped me sign up for all my classes, including a summer class, because she has all these classes she wants me to sign up for. She knows that I want to be a teacher, and she knows the process. She’s kind of grooming me now to go through all that.” Raymond has also had very positive interactions with the campus’s TRIO office: “All the people up in TRIO have been great…. They’re just there as support, like when I need to ask a question about something, who do I go to for this, or math help. They’re just always there as a little bit of a network, a safety net basically.” Like Raymond, Lance has praise for both his professors and the student support staff. Together, they have helped him to form rigorous study habits that he credits for his success. A professor in his first semester helped him rethink his approach to studying by stressing the importance of rigorous study skills and not deviating from the plan:

A faculty member told me that I had to have a rigorous study habit if I want to do well. Saturday is my prime time to go sit at the library and get some work done. I just go there and do some extra work or study, because I just don’t have enough time, so I make a real plan and I don’t deviate from it. Like I said, the recipe for success is to really nail down a steady hour schedule, schedule yourself, no distractions, no cell phone, no Facebook, no nothing.

Lance also credits his classmates with helping him to improve his study habits: “they were helping me develop a better studying habit, because I’m set in my ways at my age, and it was
hard to break poor habits. So I had to re-teach myself commitment.” As part of those positive study habits, Lance gives credit to the tutors who have helped him: “Tutors. Tutors, tutors, tutors. Tutors! I would not have been able to get through chemistry if it wasn’t for my tutor.” Here, Lance’s use of exuberant repetition shows how much he values his tutors’ help. Lance told one especially powerful story about the way a compassionate faculty member and his commitment to use tutoring combined to help him achieve success:

I remember taking a quiz for one of my biology classes, and it all looked like Chinese writing to me. So I wrote a note to the professor on the quiz. I said, I just got a tutor. If you give me a couple of days, a week, she will walk through this with me and I’ll be okay. He said, okay, you can have a week. I got an A.

Those small acts of flexibility and understanding in conjunction with his strong sense of self-discipline have helped Lance to stay on track.

**Building Momentum/Sense of Belonging**

Despite their initial anxiety about their transition into the community college, the participants explained they now feel as if they have “figured it out” and that they belong at the college. John and Xavier both reported that they made the Dean’s List and felt a sense of accomplishment. Raymond won an award for academic promise based on his artwork and his performance in his art classes. Lance noted that despite the setbacks he faced after his father’s death, he has now established positive momentum toward earning his degree. As these working-class male students’ experiences show, feeling that strong sense of connection to the college and validating it with strong academic grades helps to establish and confirm their ability to achieve academic success.
When the interviewer asked them to describe a time when they felt successful at the college, nearly all of the participants referred to grades. John noted that his first good grade on an English paper made him feel exceptionally good:

I was in an English class, and I had turned in an essay, and I got an A. And she said, “I don’t give out As.” I was like, really? And that was the first A I’ve ever gotten in my life. Like in high school, I was in a foster home, other things were going on. Not like, you’ve got to do good in school, more like you have to try to survive. When I got that A, I knew I could do it. I know I can do things, but I was like, holy shit, I can do it. I was really happy about that. Like a kid (laughs), put it on the fridge.

During the second interview John reflected on how much making the Dean’s List meant to him:

It’s weird because when I first started here I didn’t have too many expectations, but now I’m like, I could really do it. Even with that Dean’s List thing, I honestly never, I’ve never done that ever. It does make me feel better, it really does. I don’t have high self-esteem, I’ve just got to fake it out, you know, you do what you do, but it does make me feel pretty good.

Much like John, Xavier also made the Dean’s List and sees it as both motivation and a tangible financial incentive:

When I do well, I get an attaboy, and we just move on. It’s not like, let’s throw a party because you were on the Dean’s List, it’s more like “yeah, we knew you could do it.” Then I’m like, “Do you know what I had to do to get there?” But it’s like, let’s be humble, not toot on our horn too much. But in a moment of quiet reflection, I re-read the letter and I say, you know, that really doesn’t seem like a fake letter. Though it’s pretty general, it really does feel like they’re praising you for doing a good job. So that’s when
it really sunk in, these words written from an institution of higher learning say that you’ve done it and continue to do it, and this is the excellence we’re looking for. So, good job, keep going, you know. Then the precursor to that is the financial incentive to be on the Dean’s List, transitioning to another college at a tuition reduction in state. It’s about the end result.

Because Xavier has experienced academic success and has embraced the idea of growth mindset, he is now willing to take on academic challenges he might not have before: “I think the more you whittle away at those hurdles, the more confidence you start gaining. And then you gain steam, and the next thing you know you feel invincible. I haven’t quite gotten to the invincibility part, but we’re getting there. (both laugh)” For students who had initially had a low sense of self-esteem like Xavier and John, experiencing academic success and the validation of making the Dean’s List helped them to gain this feeling of building momentum. Now with a higher sense of self-confidence, they are in a good position to persist at the college through graduation.

Ross’s connection to the college has less to do with earning high grades (which is something he more or less takes for granted) and instead focuses on the combination of a “selfish course” and a work-study job. Although he is an engineering major, he has gotten greater enjoyment out of a computer science networking course. He identified his computer science professor as a positive role model at the college and identified this class as a “selfish class”:

Ross: One of the CIS professors. He and I have formed a good relationship. He offered me a work study, and I like the CISCO networking stuff, even if I was just taking that because I like it, not for any reason in particular for what I’m studying. Because those credits probably won’t, you know, go towards my degree. It was just something to take to take, you know what I mean? He’s very helpful and he’s caring, and he seems to give
attention to his students. And there are things I can talk about with him outside of classes, so that would be why.

Interviewer: Is that what you meant in the first interview when you referred to it as a “selfish” class? What did you mean by that?

Ross: Yeah, it was just something that I wanted to do. So, it was selfish. It didn’t further any goal, it didn’t serve any purpose, it was just something I was interested in and I wanted to do. So it was kind of selfish, in a sense.

Although he plans to continue with the engineering major because “I know I’ll get paid more as an engineer, I hate to say,” Ross has enjoyed his work-study job based on the computer networking class: “having the work-study for that as well has been immensely helpful because it’s helped further my knowledge of networking, but I’ve been able to help my fellow students with problems they’ve had in math class or science class as well. So that’s beneficial to me.”

Given Ross’s earlier experiences at his four-year institution and his negative work experiences, forming these positive connections have been extremely important for him. Now that he has his new job at the bank, however, he worries he might lose that momentum:

Community colleges, while they might be known for night classes and stuff, this college’s night selections are like, finance and liberal arts. It’s not anything that’s technical. I mean, that makes sense. There’s an expectation that if you’re studying engineering it should be your full time job. But I think that’s a bit unfair too, to an extent, because I would like it if I could take a calculus class at 7:00 at night. If I could take all of my classes between the hours of 3:00 PM and midnight, I would do it because I am not a morning person. I am nothing but a miserable wretch in the morning. (laughs)
Ross acknowledges that if he had to decide between his new job and his community college courses, he’s going to choose work. Thus, while he has established momentum, it remains tenuous at best.

For Lance, the academic pathway leading to his ultimate goal to become a registered nurse has become extremely motivating. Even when others suggest that he could take an easier, quicker route, he remains focused on his academic and career goal: “My goals were to become an RN and didn’t deviate from that. Some people were like, bridge over from LPN to RN. I was like, no, that’s not for me.” Lance uses the word “striving” to explain why meeting his goals is so meaningful for him:

I like being here, I like having a purpose, getting up, getting dressed, coming here at 9:00 in the morning. I tell people I’m striving to become an RN, I’m not trying. I’m striving.

There will be bumps, there will be some setbacks, but I keep striving to be an RN. Striving, gaining steam, building momentum—these are the key images these students use to show that they now feel they are well on their way to earning their degree and experiencing college success.

Conclusions

In all of these ways, these working-class male community college students are finding ways to build their feeling of self-confidence and self-efficacy to achieve college success. Having worked at demanding, labor-intensive jobs, they possess a strong work ethic, roll up their sleeves and commit themselves to putting in the long hours to learn the material for their classes. Drawing on experiences as varied as competitive shooting competitions, Narcotics Anonymous, and prison, they apply survival strategies learned elsewhere to meet the demands of the college environment. When those other strategies don’t work, however, they recognize the value of having a caring, knowledgeable insider who can help show them the way. Each of these students
has found that one connection that makes them feel they belong, and that can make all the difference.

**Masculinity Issues**

This research study began with the premise that working-class male students might be experiencing greater levels of disengagement than other groups of students. For the most part, six of the seven participants did not report any negative experiences based on their working-class masculinity. Only one student, John, felt he had been treated negatively based on his masculinity. Several others noted that, theoretically, men might be treated differently, but they had not experienced negative treatment themselves. Lance discussed issues faced by male students of color, but he felt he himself had not been impacted. This section will begin by discussing John’s negative experiences in depth and will then move on to a brief discussion of other participants’ awareness of male disengagement issues.

**Negative Experiences Based on Masculinity**

Among the interview participants, John was the only one who reported feeling that he had been treated negatively because of his masculinity. He described two separate negative encounters with his professors that he perceived to be based on his gender. John began as a psychology major but soon had a negative encounter with his female professor in his Introduction to Psychology course:

She said she used to work with males who were like… She used to work in a shelter for women, so she always encountered males who were super-mean and whatever. And I know I kinda put off an attitude, but I don’t do that. Anyway, it was almost like, errr, man, blah blah blah, like, there’s guys in the room, whatever.

Here, John clearly feels that he was being judged harshly because of the professor’s negative perceptions of men. He acknowledged that he can be somewhat intimidating by saying “I kinda
put off an attitude,” but he was bothered by the way this professor reacted to his presence. John noted that his later experiences with this professor were more positive, causing him to reevaluate their interaction:

The Intro to Psych teacher said, you know, she said something that was really encouraging, basically. And that’s what changed my mind about her. It was like, man, if you had just acted like a human being in the first place, and… you know what? That really did change things. Because I was like, I’m not going to totally pass judgment on this person who saw me as…. Because I did well, I got an A in the class. But there was this thing where, like, I was like a predator, you know? It was weird. But thinking back on it, maybe her experiences just made it like that.

Although John earned a strong grade in the class, he feels there was a negative judgment of him based on the fact he is a man. While that class ended on a more or less positive note, his second psychology course definitely did not.

John reported an extremely negative interaction with a male psychology professor based on issues of gender. In John’s opinion, the professor lost control of the classroom because no one was doing any work. The course involved watching films outside of class, and several female students told John they were not watching them or planning to participate in class discussions. Things escalated when the professor spoke to John outside of class:

Oh, and another thing he did. (laughs) He says, I want to have a meeting with you and [another male student], and I’m like, why? So I go to have this meeting with him and he says, “John, I’m trying to figure out how to get people to participate.” And I’m like, what do you want me to do? I don’t know what I can do. And he’s like, “You know what the hierarchy is with men and women.” And I’m like, yeah, but I don’t want to hear that.
What is the problem? And he says, I think you and [the other male student] are intimidating the girls, by just our presence. And I’m like, that’s horseshit. You know that’s not true.

John’s agitation while he recounted this incident was obvious. Not only did he feel singled out, he felt that these implications of intimidating or sexist behavior were completely unfounded and detrimental to his own college experience. While John never used the word “sexist” in his description of the incident, it was clear that is what he felt he was being accused of:

Like, I’m not against women doing stuff, you know, I’ve got two daughters, I don’t think…. If you can do it, do it. If you can do it good, do it, you know, whatever. I don’t particularly think men and women are equal, equal. We’re unique in our ways, and we should join together and be one, you know? I mean that’s my opinion, but I’m not against women, which he implied.

Whereas John felt the class dynamic broke down because other students were not doing the work, he believed the professor was blaming him based on his gender and was treating him negatively because of it: “He didn’t even think it could have been something else. He just went straight to ‘you guys, you guys.’” John continued to be annoyed by this negative interaction, returning to it in the second interview as well: “It totally boggled my mind. To me, it’s dangerous. How am I going to get a fair shake in his class with that attitude?”

While this incident with his male psychology professor annoyed John the most, he reported several other examples of feeling ignored or disrespected on campus because of his gender. He described female students unintentionally but obliviously blocking doorways and stairwells and refusing to move to let others by, including a male professor:
This happens every couple weeks. Either people aren’t paying attention or, these two were like blatantly in the way. I saw them, I paused, they looked me and didn’t move. And the teacher, he had to do the same thing. But they just looked at us, and that’s happened a few times already…. And the teacher too. He looked at me like, “what are they doing?” I don’t know, dude, they’re not moving. They think we’re trash or something. *(laughs)*

While this incident may seem somewhat trivial, John feels it is indicative of a pattern of female students feeling entitled and catered to by the faculty and the college campus as a whole:

I don’t want to sound misogynistic but… I know we’re trying to help women do stuff, but sometimes it seems like, “who cares about you, dude, get out of here.” I mean, I do kind of feel like that. But then again, the world’s kind of leaning like that…. Like in the lab, people will come in and slam their stuff down and it says no food or drink, and they’re like pissy, and it always seems to be, girls. Certainly not everyone, I’m not trying to… And they get away with it, and it’s like, damn, they get away with everything.

John’s descriptions of his experiences make it clear he perceives a pattern of privileging female students at the expense of male students. From blocking stairwells to teachers protecting female students in classes, John feels he as a male student is being put at a disadvantage.

Clearly, John feels that as a man he is being discriminated against on this community college campus. Because a female professor had negative interactions with men in the past, she reacted to him “like, I was like a predator, you know?” Because his male psychology professor lost control of a class, John was accused of intimidating the female students just by his presence. While John acknowledges that all students must feel welcomed and empowered, he feels he is being unfairly treated in the process: “I mean the very thing you’re protecting them with, you’re
screwing me over with.” And beyond the classroom, he feels that the college is not a welcoming place for men in general. Summing up his negative experiences with faculty and his observations of the campus environment, John stated “I feel like it’s not really for guys here.”

**Awareness of Male Disengagement Issues**

By far, John had the most negative experiences and was the most outspoken. Based largely on John’s experiences, the researcher included a question in the second interview schedule asking directly about the participants’ experiences as men at the community college. Except for John, none had experienced such negativity directly. When Dugan heard the question he responded by saying “loaded question” and laughed. Then, however, he went on to say “The thing a lot of people don’t realize is, you do get judged because you’re a guy all the time too, just like women get judged because they’re women.” Dugan said that while he hadn’t experienced negativity himself, he thinks guys in general do suffer from negative stereotypes. He believes men feel pressured to enact the macho, aggressive “player” stereotype, and that both men and women suffer from the sexual double standard in our society:

> You know, the example, if you hear that a girl is having sex with a bunch of guys, you hear this all the time in sexual harassment training or whatever, a girl is like, going out with a bunch of guys, she’s for lack of a better term, a whore, whatever. And if a guy does it, he’s a player. The thing that nobody thinks about is, that still affects both people in different ways. The guy is less obvious, but the dude who is the player grows up to be, like guys don’t like him either. He grows up to be, a dick. Nobody really thinks about, it’s not… Like I said, guys have their issues that are specific to them, women have their issues that are specific to them, and women’s issues get a lot more attention than guys’ issues do, for sure.
Dugan was clearly uncomfortable as he formulated this response, pausing for long stretches and searching for words to describe this phenomenon. When the researcher suggested the phrase “double standard,” Dugan slapped the table and exclaimed, “Yes! Oh my god, yes, that’s it. The double standard.” He went on to explain the harmful effect that double standard can have on men as well as women: “guys today grow up feeling like they’re denizens of the patriarchy or something, they’re tyrants in waiting or whatever. And that’s a very hostile place for people to grow up in.” Here, Dugan shows his awareness of this potential hostility in the society around him. Though he does not feel that he has been treated as a “tyrant in waiting” himself, he acknowledges the negativity other men he knows have encountered at the college and in our society as a whole.

Like Dugan, Ross did not feel he had been treated negatively based on issues of gender. As Ross put it, “I wouldn’t say I’m judged or anything because the campus feels to me, for the most part, judgment-free.” He explained that he thinks men are expected to be results-driven and not to need to ask for help in completing tasks. That lack of willingness to ask for help, Ross explained, can result in men putting themselves at a disadvantage: “I know that for people like my cousin, he can sit there and struggle silently with what he’s doing, and he could clearly be in distress and in need of help, but you’d never notice it because he doesn’t show it. That’s part of being masculine, not showing that you need help.” Ross acknowledged that some male students can be reluctant to ask for help, especially from female professors, due to their masculine self-perception and male ego:

I would say that based on my experiences as a guy, it would be their masculinity that would prevent them from going to a female professor and being like, I don’t get this, can you show me this. And you hear a lot of complaints from students, like “I don’t know
what she is trying to tell me.” And it’s like, why don’t you just ask? You know, if you’re not getting it, ask. (laughs) It’s not going to hurt you, nobody is going to sit there and go, “oh, you’re not manly because you asked a female professor how to do math.”

While Ross joked about men being stereotypically unwilling to ask for help in order to protect their masculine self-image, Xavier actually demonstrated this behavior in relation to asking for help with math.

Xavier: Exactly. And it’s also a mentality too. I don’t want to keep bugging my math mod teacher. I’ve been upside down through all 25 math problems and I still don’t get it.

Interviewer: But you should. That’s what they’re there for.

Xavier: But you see what I mean. It’s not so much pride as I don’t want anyone to know that I’m struggling this much. That comes in to play. So it’s almost like swallowing your pride in a way, or being open to criticism, or being open to being stung.

While in other contexts Xavier talked about the importance of seeking guidance and asking for help when you need it, he also admitted that asking for help can make male students feel even more vulnerable and open to criticism. As Ross and Xavier both show in their own way, male students often demonstrate the need to avoid looking vulnerable in front of others, even if it puts them at an academic disadvantage.

Lance discussed issues of masculinity directly, especially in terms of the challenges that face men of color at the community college. He identified gender as a key motivator for earning a college degree that will allow men to support their families but also acknowledges that “it’s hard for males to go to school, especially if they have a family because they need to be a provider. It’s a struggle.” Lance displays a feeling of frustration with younger male students who do not make the most of their opportunities:
This is college, this is not high school. This is not public school. \( \textit{low deep voice} \) “Oh, I just didn’t feel like getting up.” In the back of my mind I’m like, there are a lot of days I don’t feel like getting up. So I told them, you need to check where your priorities are at. Because it’s a waste of time and somebody else can get the grant, somebody else can have the Pell grant, somebody else can get your seat and get your education if you’re not serious about it.

Lance feels strongly that making the most of the college opportunity comes down to a sense of personal drive:

There’s a lot of things you can do here at [this community college], it’s just, what is your drive? And it’s hard to get young African American men to follow suit. I don’t know.

They, they don’t want to, I don’t know. They begin to participate a little bit and then they just went to the wayside. And when they went to the wayside, they left school altogether. As Lance shared these observations, his frustration with male students of color who do not share his sense of “striving” to earn their degree was obvious. He clearly feels a deep sense of empathy for their challenges while also holding them responsible for failing to take charge of their own education.

In an attempt to help with these types of issues, Lance joined the college’s Men of Color Initiative, but he felt it needs to be revamped and more student-directed to be truly effective. While he enjoyed some of the group’s activities, such as a coat drive for the needy and welcoming elementary kids back to school in the fall, he questioned whether such a group can be successful at a community college. Students’ extremely busy schedules made it difficult for the group to establish positive momentum: “I think one of our biggest challenges is, finding a time for men to meet to talk about what they’re going through, how we can help you get through this
semester. And you know, some men are too afraid to ask for help. Sometimes you have to go and ask them, do you need help?” For Lance, that willingness to intervene to offer guidance is crucial:

If they have that bewildered look, you have to be willing to step outside yourself, outside your comfort zone and talk to somebody you don’t know. You can tell if somebody has this bewilderedness or (low deep voice) “I’m struggling but I’m not gonna ask for help because I’m too macho.”

Lance’s use of that deep male voice shows his understanding that for men in particular, being willing to ask for help is unlikely—it is up to the college to reach out actively to help, whether that help was requested or not. As Lance sums it up, “It takes that one teacher or that one person to help you or break you.” Without that help, bewilderment becomes frustration that leads directly to leaving the college and not coming back.

Conclusions

Based on the participants’ descriptions of their experiences, they did not report feeling disengaged from the community college. Only one student, John, felt he had been treated negatively based on of his masculinity, but his sense of negative judgment, hostility from faculty, and unwelcomeness on the community college campus was acute. While he has received some positive encouragement from his professors, he remains skeptical that the community college is a place “for guys.” While the other participants did not share this skeptical view to the same extent, they did display an understanding of the reasons why some male students might feel as John does. Xavier’s unwillingness to ask for help in order to protect his sense of independence, demonstrates one way male students place themselves at an academic disadvantage. What Lance perceives as other students’ lack of drive to fully engage, of being “too macho” to ask for help, can result in leaving the college and never coming back. If a student like John feels unwelcome
and perceives the college to be hostile to his interests, is it any wonder if he chooses not to return?

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into working-class male students’ perspectives of the first-year experience at a rural community college. A close analysis of the interview data yielded several insights into students’ understanding of their experiences, their challenges, and their successes in their first year at the college. Growing up in working-class families and often experiencing many years of their own unsatisfying, high-stress, low-paying jobs, these students were ready to take the plunge into the community college to improve the quality of their lives. While these students often felt overwhelmed by their lack of familiarity with college culture, the intervention of positive institutional agents, among both student support staff and faculty, made them feel welcome and supported as they made the transition. Without that crucial intervention, they may have given up on their college experience before it even began. Without that moment of assistance, it is hard to say whether or not they would have continued on their college journey.

Once they had committed to their community college experience, these students had a high level of anxiety about achieving a school/work/life balance that would allow them to thrive, or even just survive. All had financial concerns about the cost of their education, the difficulty of making financial ends meet, and the lingering anxiety that college is a gamble that might not pay off. Still, these students find ways to remain motivated, drawing on the support of family and friends to keep themselves on track. This strong sense of determination despite the difficulty of the task, of striving to reach their goals, shows the strong sense of motivation these working-class male community college students share. Drawing on experiences as varied as competitive shooting competitions, Narcotics Anonymous, and prison, they apply “survival strategies”
learned elsewhere to meet the demands of the college environment. They recognize the importance of building a sense of self-efficacy, positive momentum, and pride in their ability to achieve college success.

The unfortunate reality at many community colleges is, however, that many students do not make those connections, they do not find the strategies that work, and they walk away from the college experience. For working-class male students in particular, the danger of walking away is a persistent reality. Because the researcher focused on interviewing students who had achieved success and persisted to at least their second semester, no former students who left the college were interviewed. As John's negative encounters with several faculty members revealed, he came very close to walking away. And as several other interviewees indicated, they recognize why working-class male students may be more susceptible to making that choice. If they do not form a strong sense of connection, if they are not academically validated, and if they do not feel welcome and appreciated on campus, they may decide that college is simply not worth it.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into working-class male students’ strategies to overcome challenges and achieve success during their first year at a community college. While a large and growing body of research exists focusing on first-generation, working-class, and male students’ college experiences separately, few studies bring all three identity categories together. What does exist tends to take a deficit approach focused on what these students lack, or warns about the danger of focusing on those deficits. In contrast, this research study focused on learning from working-class male students at a community college who have successfully persisted to at least a second semester in order to gain a deeper understanding of the strategies they employed to achieve success, while acknowledging the challenges they faced as part of their lived experience.

It is important to recognize that each college student experiences the transition to college from his or her own unique perspective, encountering barriers and overcoming challenges based on his or her own strengths and assets. Because each working-class male student experiences this messy, challenging transition in his own way, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology was used to capture the participants’ sense-making as they reflected on their first semester at the community college. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production through the interaction of habitus, capital, and field (Bourdieu, 1990, 1994, 2001), with an emphasis on the social construction of masculinities (Connell, 2005; Harris, 2008), provided the theoretical framework for this research. Four themes were identified that include: Anxiety During Transition to College; School/Work/Life Balance; Building Self-Efficacy to Achieve College Success; and, Masculinity Issues.

In this final chapter, each of the four findings are discussed and situated within the context of the published literature to determine whether the findings support or contradict
previous research. Following a discussion of the findings, recommendations for practice will be presented. The chapter will conclude by offering recommendations for future research.

**Anxiety During Transition to College**

As the working-class male students reflected on their transition into the community college, they displayed a strong conviction that college would be a beneficial gateway to a better life, but also a high degree of uncertainty about what this new role of college student would involve. They paid considerable attention to the economic return on investment of the college experience, emphasizing the cost and opportunity cost of not working while taking classes. While they recognized the gamble of investing large amounts of time, effort, and money into their college education, they also saw it as a gamble worth taking to improve their lives. Even after they had decided to start that journey, however, they frequently did not know how to navigate the mysterious labyrinth of the college culture. Only through the help of informational insiders did they learn how to form their new role as college student.

The interview participants’ accounts are consistent with the published literature about the entry into the community college experience. Like so many other groups of students, working-class students aspire to the social mobility signified by the college degree. Schudde and Goldrick-Rab (2015) noted that earning a college degree largely insulates low-income students from economic turmoil, whereas “Non-college graduates from low-income families face difficulty overcoming their limited social, cultural, and monetary resources, constraining their opportunities for economic and occupational success” (p. 29). Hollifield-Hoyle and Hammons (2015) found the desire for stable employment and the opportunity to escape the cycle of poverty are often identified as the main reasons to attend college. The college degree is definitely seen as the “golden ticket” to achieving a better life; as one community college student put it, “You have to go to college to get where you gotta go and that’s it” (Nielsen, 2015, p. 271).
Several of the interview participants decided to take the plunge into the community college in direct reaction to a negative work experience. Recognizing a feeling of dissonance between their day-to-day life and their sense of their own potential, they felt they were “better” than what they were being forced to do. Latz (2012) referred to such moments of dissonance as “habitus spark” moments. Pushed by dissatisfaction with their lived everyday experiences, the students were now willing to put themselves through the discomfort involved in a major life transition. The desire to achieve economic opportunity, to provide better lives for their families, and to explore their interests and pursue their passions was sufficient motivation for them to take the gamble to try something new.

The high levels of anxiety felt by several of the participants during course registration and the first few weeks of the semester confirm two other aspects of the literature: the importance of being explicit about the role of the college student, and the importance of reaching out to help first-generation and working-class students succeed. Karp and Bork (2012) and Soria (2015) identified a strong disconnect between what first-generation students think they should do in their new role as college students and what faculty expect their students to do. For community college students who do not have a clear understanding of the study skills and other tools for navigating the college environment, faculty must be explicit about their assumptions rather than expecting students to figure it out for themselves. Soria (2015) warned that faculty often suffer from an unconscious middle-class or upper-class bias, assuming their students already know these unspoken rules and possess the cultural capital associated with wealth and privilege. Whereas more affluent students have parents, family, and friends who have already attended college, working-class students might not have anyone to serve as a role model or guide. The college knowledge that seems to come so easily to students whose parents have already attended
college can feel completely alien to working-class students. Several of the interview participants confirm this aspect of the literature, reporting that intense anxiety due to their lack of familiarity with the college context nearly led them to give up on their college journey before it even began.

 Luckily, in these cases someone associated with the college stepped up and reached out to help in their moment of need. Rendón (1994) pointed out the importance of “validation” experiences for first-generation students, especially African American and Latino/a students, who respond more “when someone took the initiative to lend a helping hand, to do something that affirmed them as being capable of doing academic work and that supported them in their academic endeavors and social adjustment” (p. 44). Rather than passively waiting for the student to figure out college processes, active validation involves institutional agents taking the initiative to help students even if they haven’t asked. The participants’ experiences with positive institutional agents who made them feel welcome, explained the unfamiliar enrollment processes to them, and put them at ease confirms these aspects of the literature.

 In summary, the first finding reflects the working-class male students’ belief that the college was worth pursuing but also how anxious they felt during that transition. The helping hand of a key institutional agent affirmed and guided them during their initial experience, making them feel validated and welcome. Even after that initial entry into the unfamiliar world of the community college, they still felt concerns about their ability to strike a workable balance between the competing priorities in their lives, which is the second finding.

School/Work/Life Balance

Once the working-class male students took the plunge and began their college journey, they still needed to find a way to make it work. The participants all felt the strain of combining this new role of college student with the other parts of their complex lives. Work was the overriding issue—continuing to make enough money to support themselves, their family, and
pay for their schooling. On top of those issues, the constant worry that there might not be a lucrative job at the end of the college experience was clearly an issue as well.

The interview participants’ experiences are largely consistent with the published literature. It should come as no surprise that money issues are a major concern for working-class students who choose to attend community college. As Engle and Tinto (2008) reported, the vast majority of low-income, first-generation, and historically underrepresented groups use community college as their gateway into higher education. And yet, even within the community college sector, the needs of working-class students continue to be overlooked (Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015). Students’ financial status and the need to work full-time are the predominant reasons why low-income, first-generation students feel the need to drop out (Nakajima, Dembo, & Mossler, 2012; Martin, 2015). These financially-strapped students feel the high “pecuniary cost” of tuition, fees and textbooks, the “opportunity costs” represented by the inability to work more hours to earn more income, and the “psychic costs” of frustration, anxiety, and self-doubt (Stuart, Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2014, p. 333). Among the study participants, while each dealt with the financial strain in different ways, each was highly aware that college was a financial transaction.

Because community college students’ financial motivations and socioeconomic identities are so important to their decision to attend college, and to remain when times get tough, they must be incorporated directly into the question of student engagement. Stuart, Rios-Aguilar, and Deil-Amen (2014) explained that students’ perceptions of the connection of academic programs to the current job market represent a crucial reason to remain at the college. In order to maximize the chances of student retention, they argue, community colleges must “find concrete ways to increase students’ college-career alignment—the connection between students’ college
experiences, career goals, and their employment opportunities” (338). The study participants’ experiences confirm this aspect of the literature, emphasizing their career-focused motivation to be police officers, nurses, teachers, and engineers as their key motivation for remaining at the college and attaining their degrees.

Along with financial issues, the attitude and support of family members was a common issue for the study participants. In research on first-generation, working-class students, the issue of family role models is often approached from a position of deficit—lack of familial role models to provide social capital and cultural capital (Bergerson, 2007; Lehmann, 2007; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007; Soria, 2015). Whereas continuing-generation students can ask family members about college experiences in order to form expectations and navigational strategies, first-generation students by definition usually do not have that type of role model to pattern their own strategies upon. Furthermore, much like work obligations, family obligations frequently result in distraction from college studies, resulting in sub-par study habits and sleep deprivation as the reality of the students’ lives. Some working-class families may not have experienced education as a realistic pathway to an improved lifestyle; some may even be actively hostile to the college experience, seeing students who choose school over work as class traitors (Jehangir, Stebleton, & Deenanath, 2015; Lehmann, 2007). Despite those negatives, some scholars also find that family members—even those who did not go to college—often serve as motivation and inspiration. Community college student-parents frequently cite their children as the driving force behind their desire to improve their lives; they are, quite literally, doing it for their kids (Latz, 2012; Peterson, 2016). Students of color and students from immigrant families frequently see themselves as indebted to and personally responsible for their parents’ sacrifices, needing to earn their degree and improve their lives to make their parents’ sacrifices pay off.
All of the study participants reported experiences that are consistent with the literature on the importance of family members and loved ones in their pursuit of their college degree. They credited their parents (whether they had gone to college or not), girlfriends, wives and children as their primary motivators and support system as they pursue their degree. As role models and sources of inspiration, family is indeed a critical part of how and why these students find college success.

For working-class students in particular, however, there can be a danger when a sense of personal responsibility intersects with lack of familiarity with college environment and expectations. Based on interviews with working-class, first-generation female students at a community college, Nielsen (2015) explained that successful working-class students view “high aspirations as indicators of moral worth” that, somewhat paradoxically, “draw boundaries between themselves and other disadvantaged people” (p. 266). Retroactively, they see themselves as the ones who “deserved” to earn their degrees, while those who dropped out along the way were never really “college material.” While successful first-generation and working-class students acknowledge the potential usefulness of student support services, they also frequently take pride in their ability to succeed without resorting to using those services, preferring to figure things out for themselves (Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). This strategy of personal independence and self-reliance can be empowering because it taps into a key trait of the working-class self-image, but it can also act as a barrier to seeking help when the student needs it most.

On this topic the participants’ experiences only somewhat agreed with the published research. Several participants displayed an unwillingness to ask for help, asserting the need to figure it out for themselves, even when times get hard. Several others, however, spoke with great
enthusiasm about the helpfulness of the campus student support offices, especially TRIO and the Tutoring Center, as they learned to navigate the college environment. One participant even took pleasure in making himself “someone else’s problem,” considering the ability to seek help as a key part of the student experience. Each of these experiences and strategies reveals how the students worked to shape their sense of self-efficacy and belonging at the college, which is the next finding.

**Building Self-Efficacy to Achieve College Success**

Each of the participants in the study identified the importance of feeling he “belonged” at the college, though their paths toward establishing that sense of belonging were noticeably different. In order to build that sense of belonging, they relied on “survival strategies” they had developed in other parts of their life, a close connection to one or more institutional agents, and the feeling of success when they received academic praise.

The interview participants’ accounts are consistent with the published literature about the importance of creating a sense of belonging and mattering at the college. Means and Pyne (2017) emphasized the importance of creating this sense of belonging for college students, especially first-generation students, low-income students, and students of color. Not only have many community college students never received academic praise before, they may have felt actively devalued and diminished in their schools and college classes. Means and Pyne (2017) identified the importance of friendly, caring faculty, knowledgeable support staff, and social opportunities like clubs and support centers to build this sense of connection and belonging. Unfortunately, the structure of community colleges can often work against this feeling of mattering by taking a deficit-focused approach to students’ lack of college preparedness. Because community college students often need to take developmental courses in math, writing, and/or reading, and because they are often unfamiliar with the college knowledge more affluent students bring to college with
them, they all too often feel unprepared and unwelcome. Harper (2012) developed the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework to counter such negative messages, emphasizing instead the assets, strengths and abilities low-income students and students of color bring to the college with them. Rather than focusing on what these students can’t do, this framework emphasizes ways to incorporate students’ own voices, culture, and experiences as a positive foundation. Similarly, Morales (2014) stressed the importance of designing assignments early in the student experience that reward effort rather than assignments that assume pre-existent knowledge or familiarity with the unspoken rules of college. While it’s critical for faculty and support staff to help students achieve a realistic understanding of their current abilities, Morales argued, it is also crucial to build the self-confidence that can then be converted into a stronger sense of self-efficacy. Yosso (2005) and Campa (2013) made building students’ sense of self-efficacy based on their culture even more explicit. Whereas some models of student integration present college as a move away from the student’s home culture to adopting the culture of the academy, Yosso (2005) emphasized the value of that home culture for the student’s sense of identity and self-empowerment. Campa (2013) identified “pedagogies of survival” that link the students’ sense of resilience and cultural identity to strategies for achieving college success. Using these assets-based approaches, Harper (2012), Morales (2014), Yosso (2005) and Campa (2013) affirm the strengths the students already possess as the bridge to the college experience.

The working-class male participants’ experiences in this study confirm and expand on the published literature in insightful and exciting ways. While traditional student integration theory would probably view some of the participants’ prior life experiences as detriments or deficits (going to prison, drug addiction), the male students experience them as strategies for exercising their pre-existent strengths, assets and ways of knowing in the college environment. They
employ them as survival skills as they make the transition. For instance, the older, non-traditional students had developed a strong sense of work ethic in their years of working manual labor jobs. Though they did not enjoy catering to the whims of their often arbitrary or even negligent bosses, they had clearly learned a “roll up your sleeves” mentality that they then applied to the rigors of their college work. That working-class ethos is a prime example of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990, 1994), the “way of seeing” that becomes the lens for understanding how the world works. Time management skills and self-discipline learned through competitive shooting competitions, artistic training received in prison, and commitment to self-care and self-discipline learned through Narcotics Anonymous all serve as powerful examples of survival skills that represent habitus-in-action. Rather than seeking to impose new ways of learning or managing their time on these resourceful students to make them “college ready,” community college practitioners need to recognize and tap into these valuable assets and help students modify them to thrive within their new environment.

When those pre-existent strategies from other parts of life do not work, however, it is essential that knowledgeable and caring institutional agents step in to guide the student in the right direction, even if the student hasn’t explicitly asked for help. Supportive faculty who reach out individually to help students and demonstrate a positive attitude to student success serve as the “cultural glue’ that connects the students’ precollege experiences, values and norms with those of higher education and academia” (Morales, 2014, p. 100). The positive institutional agent does not need to be faculty; often advisors, club leaders, and mentors fulfill this critical function. Morales (2014) and Matos (2015) note the importance of identity-based spaces where students of color, veterans, GLBTQ students, and female students can gather to share their experiences in a safe space. In describing the experiences of rural Appalachian community college students in
Kentucky, Hlinka (2017) stresses the importance of an entire wrap-around system of support that is in keeping with the caring community of the surrounding area. By offering these inclusive supports, the students are guided and made to feel welcome—they are shown that they belong and that they matter.

Deil-Amen (2011) emphasized that socio-academic integrative moments *within the classroom* should be deliberately constructed experiences “in which the *academic* influence is coupled with *social* integration to provide needed support and enhance feelings of college belonging, college identity, and college competence” (p. 73). First-Year Experience (FYE) student success courses are especially well-suited for constructing these socio-academic moments, providing a concentrated, explicit introduction to the unspoken rules of college culture (Karp et al., 2010; O’Gara et al., 2009; Soria, 2015). By merging academic concerns with student support services, these courses empower students’ sense of self-efficacy by providing contextually specific coaching about when to use them to put themselves in the best position to achieve success. As Acevedo-Gil and Zerquera (2016) summed up, “each individual resource or practice reflected in the student success program was not singularly sufficient but created a synergistic support system for students” (p. 78). By providing in-class, socio-academic validation experiences like these, FYE courses allow all students to experience the sense of mattering so crucial to the community college experience.

The participants’ experiences definitely confirm the importance of ongoing relationships with caring, supportive institutional agents. For all participants, caring faculty who really got to know the students were the heart of the positive college experience. Positive feedback on essays and artwork and high grades on tests definitely made the students feel they could excel and that they belonged at college. Though it may seem obvious, grades do matter to the students. Deil-
Amen (2011) noted that for commuter and community college students, academic integration and focus on career-oriented learning material is the most highly valued part of the college experience. Being affirmed through grades, through academic recognition like being on the Dean’s List, and the financial benefits of scholarships really do matter. Several of the participants noted the importance of first-year courses structured as student success seminars, highlighting their usefulness for learning college-level study skills, time management skills, and career-related material. Along with content, these courses also allowed the participants to form close relationships with the professors and student support staff who taught them, positioning them as trusted advisors and mentors for their later college experiences. Each of the students in this study was able to find that sense of mattering, of belonging, fueled in part by achieving academic success. For some working-class male students, however, the issues surrounding masculinity and gender role expectation can make that sense of mattering difficult to achieve. These issues of masculinity and male student (dis)engage are the final finding of the study.

**Masculinity Issues**

While considerable attention has been paid to the fact that women have now outstripped their male counterparts in terms of enrolling in college and earning college degrees, it’s important to note that that this is not a simplistic case of women getting ahead at the expense of men. As Weaver-Hightower (2010) and Ewert (2012) noted, more male students are enrolling in college than ever before; it’s just that even more women are enrolling as well. Rather than assuming that all college men need help, as Kahn, Brett and Holmes (2011) put it, we must ask “which men, under what circumstances, and how does their own understanding of masculinity contribute to their motivation” (p. 77). For first-generation, working-class male students and male students of color, the answers are complex. While pre-college factors and preparation for college is important, experiences of socio-academic integration at the college are even more
crucial for persisting to degree attainment and/or transfer. The practices that make these male students feel welcome, willing to engage fully in their college experience, and feel that they matter are critical. Whether or not and how these experiences affirm or undermine the students’ self-conceptions as men can have important impact on student success.

Harris (2008) enlisted the theory of Male Gender Role Conflict (David, 2010; O’Neil, 1981, 2013) to analyze male student behavior and experiences at college. Harris and his colleagues identified lack of willingness to ask for help, an overemphasis on control and independence, domination of women and disparagement of homosexuals, and engaging in self-destructive behaviors like alcohol abuse, violence and risky sex as common overcompensations (Harris, 2008; Harris & Edwards, 2010; Harris & Harper, 2008). For working-class men choosing to pursue the new role of community college student, while still fulfilling all the other roles in their lives at the same time, the pressures can be overwhelming (Harris & Harper, 2008). Negativity can result in poor academic performance, lack of engagement with faculty and college services, and the decision to leave the college altogether.

In the context of Latino students, Sáenz, Bukoski, Lu, and Rodriguez (2013) linked negative aspects of MGRC to machismo and cultural expectations that downplay education and emphasize assertiveness, power, control, and earning money to pay for family needs. One student shared how his father’s attitudes about masculinity shaped his own: “when I would hear stories about my dad, he would tell me about how he raised us and that he didn’t need help from anybody. So when I’m in school I’m thinking I have to do everything by myself because I have something to prove, and asking for help I guess kind of weakens the cause of what I’m doing. So there is some sense of machismo in that” (p. 89-90). That sense of needing to be strong and do it for yourself can be a source of self-empowerment, but it can also prevent seeking help and lead
to academic failure. Additionally, because the code of machismo highly emphasizes the breadwinner role, school is often considered in direct opposition to supporting the family. Thus, if things get hard academically, quitting college in order to get a job to pay the bills is a convenient form of reaffirming the male self-image.

Along with these issues of self-questioning based on Male Gender Role Conflict, students also face the negative assumptions of professors and college practitioners. Strayhorn (2011) noted that African American male college students are more likely to take developmental courses, and their professors and support staff can view them as “uneducable, lazy, dangerous, loud and threatening” (Strayhorn, 2011, p. 440). When these students pick up on these negative preconceptions, “engagement apprehension” based in the “nexus of masculine and racial stereotypes” (Wood, 2014, p. 797) can result. If the student becomes upset or belligerent when faced with these stereotypes, he is seen as violent; if he shuts down and refuses to participate, he can seem uninterested. In either case, the stereotypes associated with male disengagement are confirmed and reproduced, leading the student to disengage even more.

One study participant’s experience largely confirms the literature of community college male disengagement, and several others acknowledge that these issues are familiar to them. When one participant reacted to the stress and unfamiliarity of the college environment by striking an aggressive, potentially intimidating pose that had worked for him in previous life experiences, he experienced negative interactions with faculty that made him feel marginalized and unwelcome. Other participants referred to friends and cousins who did not seek out help, especially from female faculty, because they thought it would hurt their self-image as self-reliant, independent men. These experiences of male marginalization and “engagement apprehension” confirm this part of the literature.
Such demonstrations of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) and the attitudes that are typical of “guyland” (Kimmel, 2008) are crucial aspects of the difficulties faced by working-class male students in community college. Often in our society, the traits associated with masculinity or what it means to “be a man” are assumed to be obvious and self-evident: strength, power, self-reliance, dominance. Because these performances of aggressive masculinity are demonstrated, encouraged and rewarded by powerful social voices including fathers, coaches, sports heroes and pop culture figures, and peers, college men often feel the need to over-perform these traits (Harris & Davis, 2010; Kahn, Brett & Holmes, 2011). As Kimmel (2008) explained, college becomes a primary site where the expectation of men behaving badly spirals out of control and becomes self-fulfilling prophecy, often at the expense of women, LGBT students, or other men. Yet as Harris and Davis (2010) found, the men themselves reported feeling a frustrating disconnect between the ideals they wanted to live up to and the stereotypical, often dangerous actions they performed and committed. That gap represents the space where hegemonic masculinity can potentially be challenged and changed: “Men no more than women are chained to the gender patterns they have inherited. Men too can make political choices for a new world of gender relations. Yet those choices are always made in concrete social circumstances, which limit what can be attempted” (Connell, 2005, p. 86). By tracing the complex ways in which some men react differently when placed in challenging life experiences—such as the transition into the community college—the tensions, fractures, and overcompensations of multiple masculinities are revealed to be anything but monolithic.

The study participants’ awareness of male disengagement issues but unwillingness to confirm they had been treated poorly based on their masculinity extends these aspects of the literature in compelling ways. Several participants expressed awareness of the ways the potential
male stereotypes—being viewed as the “denizens of patriarchy” or “tyrants in waiting”—could place male students in a difficult position. If men, especially working-class men who do not recognize themselves as being “privileged,” are treated as if they should be feared, a form of stereotype threat can emerge (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007; Wood & Palmer, 2015). They may react by become overly aggressive and inadvertently confirming the stereotype, or they can shut down and disengage to avoid confirming the stereotype. In either case, they feel a sense of marginalization (Means & Pyne, 2017). Several of the participants, however, noted a different understanding of masculinity, one more in line with what Kahn, Brett and Holmes (2011) referred to as an “adaptive form of masculinity” in which “the constraints of needing to win, to demonstrate homophobia, to keep one’s emotions intact and to avoid assistance from others” is replaced by a willingness to “embrace a masculinity that allows for relationships, emotional expression, and an intrinsic desire for knowledge and internal stimulation” (p. 77).

This more “adaptive masculinity” is represented by a willingness to form closer relationships with others, to develop and display empathy, to ask for help, to form deeper and more respectful relationships with women, LGBT classmates, and other men, and to mentor others as they struggle through their own transitional experiences. In other words, this adaptive masculinity results in a greater sense of mattering and more positive strategies for forming connection to the college and beyond.

Schieferecke and Card (2013) argued that helping students to develop this sense of mattering is the way to counter feelings of marginalization. Mattering is “the individuals’ perceptions that they are important, significant, and of concern to another individual, an organization, or the world” (p. 88). Schieferecke & Card (2013) found that when male students engage with their faculty, student support staff, and other students, they feel recognized and
more connected to the institution. However, they also noted that the male students they
interviewed tend to feel ignored by their professors. Similarly, Wood, Harris, and White (2015)
reported that in a survey of community college men, “half of college men (across racial/ethnic
groups) receive no validation at all from faculty members” (p. 26). Even worse, if the student
feels singled out, disparaged, or treated unfairly by the professor, marginalization can result.

With one exception, the study participants’ experiences confirm the importance of
creating a sense of mattering and belonging reported in the literature. Even for the student who
reported blatantly negative interactions with faculty, he was able to find important institutional
insiders, like his advisor and his girlfriend, who earned his trust and helped him to learn how to
navigate the community college environment. Nearly all of the participants described a sense of
mattering on campus, reporting that they had “figured it out” and that they belong. The key to
helping students to feel that they matter is for community college practitioners to show that we
care: “Support may be available and efficacious, but if faculty and staff do not communicate an
authentic care for the student, then the support may go unused. Students must believe that faculty
members authentically care about them, personally and academically” (Wood, Harris & White,
2015, p. xiv). For the students who were interviewed and had achieved college success, they had
experienced this feeling of care. Because this study did not include working-class males who had
not persisted, it does not account for those who had not felt that sense of mattering and had
already chosen to walk away.

Conclusion

The research question guiding this study was, “What strategies do working-class male
students employ to overcome challenges and achieve academic success during their first
semester at a community college?” The answer to this question was found by listening to the
working-class male students recount their anxieties, their challenges, and their sense of
accomplishment in learning how to navigate the community college experience, each in his own way. Embedded in those stories were the sense of trepidation at beginning the journey, anxiety about how to juggle the constantly competing roles of college student, family member, and real-world worker, unique strategies learned in other parts of life that empowered the student to overcome barriers, and the sense of accomplishment in achieving success.

Each of the four findings supported the research literature, with the overriding point of conjunction being the importance of caring, knowledgeable institutional insiders validating the students’ experiences, helping them learn to navigate the unfamiliar college terrain, and acknowledging their hard work and abilities to achieve academic success. While college was a gamble, the care and assistance of faculty, student support staff, and other students made it a gamble worth taking and one that would pay off. The students perceived that they mattered, even if some negative encounters had made them feel marginalized instead. While such marginalization was not the focus of these students’ stories, it should not be dismissed or ignored amidst the more positive experiences they had to tell.

The research reinforced that the students’ working-class ethos of taking responsibility and “rolling up their sleeves” was their dominant method of overcoming challenges. For some, this was accompanied with a more adaptive masculinity that was willing to break the stereotypical associations of hegemonic masculinity, to seek out help, to listen to advice, to develop a sense of greater empathy, and to offer mentorship themselves when they could. While this willingness to ask for help was noticeable, several of the men also insisted that they did not expect or want anyone to hold their hands. If the community college can find ways to build these supports into the fabric of the student experience, to reach out and validate all of its students,
then these men’s sense of independence and self-sufficiency would not need to be an issue as they pursue their path toward college success.

Although this research study focused on working-class male students who achieved academic success and remained at the college, there are certainly many working-class men who begin their college journey but do not succeed. They may feel unprepared for the rigors of college coursework, they may feel overwhelmed by real-world commitments that force them to prioritize paying jobs over education, or they may feel marginalized, ignored, or disrespected on the college campus. If we as community college practitioners view these working-class male students as only the disengaged “boys in the back of the room with their baseball caps turned backward,” we are confirming their sense of marginalization and that, as John put it, “it’s not really for guys here.”

**Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the findings of this study and the research literature, there are implications that can improve the experiences of working-class male students and help them to achieve success in the community college environment. Although the experiences of the working-class male students involved in this research for located within a single small, rural community college in the Northeast, the findings may be useful for other community colleges of varying sizes across the United States. The intent of this section is to offer specific recommendations grounded in the evidence presented in this study and specific actions I can take as a community college practitioner to improve the experience of working-class male students and their chances for attaining college success.

First, I want to reject any suggestion that female college students’ success comes at the expense of male students, or that programming or support for women should be impacted by efforts to improve male student success. Student success is not a zero-sum game that requires
some students to win while others lose, or a simple pie of resources that must be divvied out to all deserving groups. I am in no way suggesting that the needs of working-class males are “more important” than or should be prioritized over female students, LGBT students, veterans, or any other group. Rather, I believe there are many interventions and strategies that can be implemented that will improve the experiences of working-class men and almost all other community college students. If curricular and co-curricular programs can be designed to validate students’ experiences, build on their strengths and foster self-efficacy, and challenge students to critically rethink their unquestioned assumptions, they will help first-generation students, working-class students, students of color, and all students to achieve college success.

In my role as English professor at a community college, I can alter and enhance my classroom practice and course design to improve the experiences of my students. Composition courses by their very nature involve forming close connections with students, giving them the opportunity to reflect on and share their experiences in their writing and in class interactions. I can intentionally enhance the value of these socio-academic integrative moments in my own classes, highlighting the opportunity for students to talk, share, and reflect on their experiences and then use that material as the platform for their writing. To maximize the perceived value of those interactions for working-class students, I can offer the opportunity to focus on their career aspirations. I can build intentional interactions with student support services such as the Tutorial Center, TRIO, Career and Transfer Counseling, Personal Counseling, and various other service points and clubs into the classroom curriculum itself. Often community college professors simply tell students to go see a tutor or to come to office hours for help. Because some students, especially working-class male students, may interpret this as a demand that they prove themselves worthy of respect and attention, I will be sure to make myself more readily available
to help all students, even the quiet and seemingly disengaged ones in the back row, to make sure that they know they matter.

While those changes in classroom practice can potentially help all students, there are also several strategies I can use to reach out to first-generation, working-class male students in particular. Because college classrooms frequently and unconsciously model upper-class and middle-class cultural assumptions, and because professors from working-class backgrounds tend to hide their working-class roots, I can strategically discuss my own experiences as a working-class student in higher education. The lessons I learned and strategies I have developed may be helpful, and even simply acknowledging these struggles may be heartening for the working-class students I teach. I can also build asset-mapping activities into the early stages of courses, providing students with opportunities to identify and think about the strengths they already possess and how those “survival skills” could be applied within the college environment. To challenge and disrupt the usually unspoken assumptions of hegemonic masculinity, I can foreground readings and curriculum that introduce the concept of intersectional identity, gender identity politics, feminism, and multiple masculinities. By addressing these issues directly I can help draw them to the surface for consideration while also presenting the more positive, adaptive forms of masculinity discussed in this research.

Outside of my own classroom, I can work to infuse the techniques of the First-Year Experience (FYE) student success course into other gateway courses across the campus. While stand-alone student success courses can have some positive impact, I am convinced that the most promising model is to infuse these techniques in first-semester gateway courses within students’ majors. These “Introduction to the discipline” courses provide the best opportunities for helping students to learn study skills, time management skills, and college knowledge that will be most
important to them as they pursue their career-focused degrees. Discipline-specific faculty are also the best potential advisors and mentors. While all validation for students is important, getting to know these professors will “matter” the most. To aid in this process, I will work with the Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning to form and implement a community of practice focused on validation, self-efficacy, and mattering. I will also advocate with the college’s administrators to form designated first-year gateway courses across meta-majors as the key curricular locations for these innovations.

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, I do not plan to work to establish a “working-class men’s group” or a “men’s center” on campus. Based on the interview participants’ experiences and the literature, I do not think working-class men need that type of support group, and I think it would prompt the binary men vs. women thinking I want to avoid. By infusing strategies that help all first-generation, low-income students (the vast majority of all community college students), working-class men will benefit. I do, however, plan to advocate for and be part of a re-imagined and reinvigorated Men of Color Initiative at the college. Based on the experiences of the one male of color I interviewed, as well as the ongoing research of scholars like Wood, Harris, Harper, and Sáenz, the community college does need to devote more resources and mentorship for these students. I will work with the Director of the CTL, the Vice President of Student Affairs, and various faculty and student support experts on campus to form an in-depth community of practice focused on these issues. Given the nature of hegemonic masculinity, it is not enough to ask successful individuals to serve as mentors. Rather, we need to engage in in-depth discussion and training in the “adaptive masculinities” model as well as mentorship practices to make sure we know what we’re doing. The student interviewee noted that the Men of Color group should be more student-driven because, as he put it, the professors and
administrators in charge of the group dropped the ball, which sent out a powerful message of “not mattering” to the students who had been invested in the group. Rather than a masculinities-based group for all men, I will work to support this more targeted and sustained professional development effort.

Finally, beyond this specific community college, I will reach out to other community colleges and four-year colleges and universities to attempt to establish a regional group focused on the needs of working-class male students and male students of color. By pooling our in-house expertise and our resources to bring in speakers and experts, we can learn from each other and help each other to improve our students’ experiences.

By taking these actions on my own campus, working with regional partners to pursue these issues in the region, and presenting these findings at academic conferences in the area and even nationally, I can help to spread awareness of the issues I have discussed in this study. While I do not think that working-class male students face a greater level of ill-treatment than other working-class students, I do fear that their sensations of marginalization and invisibility are easier for community college practitioners to ignore. If these students suffer from engagement apprehension and sit silently in the back of the classroom, their sensations of “not mattering” can be confirmed. If they are “too macho” to ask for help when they need it, it is easier to miss the fact that they are not being helped. If their sense of stereotypically aggressive masculinity leads them to act out or behave inappropriately, it is easier to treat it as a student discipline infraction rather than a student engagement issue. For all these reasons, I will do everything I can to help this group of students feel recognized, listened to, and visible—that they matter—in my classroom and on my campus, rather than inadvertently ignoring their sense of marginalization as they sit in the back of the room, wondering whether or not college is really right for them.
Recommendations for Future Research

While the findings of this research offer important insights into the experiences of working-class male community college students, several other opportunities for future research were also identified. The differences between the experiences of traditional-aged (18-24) students and non-traditional students (ages 25 and older) were striking. The two traditional-aged students enjoyed relatively smooth transitions from high school to college, took close friendships with college classmates for granted, and enjoyed family situations that allowed them to prioritize college over work; the five non-traditional students had worked physically-demanding jobs for many years, had experienced difficulties with depression and substance abuse, and had family obligations that rendered college a secondary concern. A qualitative research study that foregrounds these age-based differences in students’ perceptions of college, as well as community college practitioners’ impressions based on student age, would be insightful. Similarly, a more direct comparison of White, working-class male students to working-class students of color would be telling. While this research study took an intersectional approach to identity, teasing out the differences in socio-academic integration, perceptions of mattering, and faculty perceptions would add significantly to the findings.

Because this study sought to learn from the experiences of students who had achieved academic success and had remained at the college, only students who had been successful were interviewed. However, given the number of working-class male students who withdraw or simply disappear within the first semester, it would be extremely insightful to capture the experiences of those who decide to walk away as well. A qualitative, IPA study that captures the experiences of a group of students, both those who remain and those who choose to leave, would help to fill in the obvious gap in this research. Capturing the students’ sense-making at the 3-week point, mid-semester, and immediately after the first semester whether the students continue
their college career or not would offer substantial insight into why some working-class male
students choose to stay and why others choose to leave.

Finally, given the problematic nature of gender stereotypes built into assumptions around
hegemonic masculinity, additional research could explore the experiences of first-generation,
working-class gay, bisexual and transgender students as they transition into the community
college setting. Given the difficulties associated with hypermasculinity and targeting of gender
nonconforming students by men, learning more from these students about their perceptions, their
challenges, and their success strategies would lend another layer of insight. Bringing their voices
into these discussions of adaptive masculinity and intersectional identity to avoid recreating
gender-based oppression is critical.

While this research has helped to expand awareness of the lived realities and perceptions
of working-class males at one community college, the need for additional research remains.
Given the ongoing national discussions of whether or not college is “worth it” and the stark
political division between “non-college-educated men” and seemingly everyone else, it is crucial
for us to break down these false binary distinctions based in hegemonic masculinity. Rather than
accepting a simplistic narrative that college benefits women at the expense of men, we must
learn from working-class men which elements of college do not work for them and which do.
We must learn how men embrace a form of adaptive masculinity and apply it in their experiences
to overcome difficulties and craft positive relationships with their college, their classmates, and
the world around them. Through a combined, concerted efforts to learn from these students and
other working-class class students as well, we can re-imagine community college so that it can
live up to its promise to provide educational equity for all.
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Appendix A
Interview Schedule-Round 1

1. **Can you tell me about your decision to go to college?**
   
   *Possible prompts:* What made you decide to go to college? Were your family and friends supportive of your decision? Why did you decide to attend this community college in particular?

2. **As your first semester began, what were you thinking about the college experience?**
   
   *Possible prompts:* What made you excited about going to college? What were you anxious about as the new semester began?

3. **Can you describe your experience during the first few weeks of your first semester?**
   
   *Possible prompts:* What were your classes like? How did you engage with the college outside of your time in the classroom?

4. **Can you describe an experience at the college that was difficult or challenging? What did you do to address that situation?**
   
   *Possible prompts:* Did anyone at the college help you to deal with this difficulty?

5. **What was an experience at the college that made you feel successful?**
   
   *Possible prompts:* How did you achieve that success? Were you able to use those strategies in other situations at the school?

6. **What went into your decision to come back to the college for another semester?**
   
   *Possible prompts:* Did anyone at the college help you with that decision?

7. **Can you tell me about your current academic and career plans?**
   
   *Possible prompts:* What do you see yourself doing in 5 years? Do you think your experiences at this college will help you with your plan?

8. **What is your personal definition of “student success”?**

9. **Thinking back on your first semester at this college, what things could the college have done to support you?**
   
   *Possible prompts:* What resources would have been helpful? Would you have liked more support?
Appendix B
Interview Schedule-Round 2

1. One common idea that emerged during the first round of interviews was the importance of support networks among family, friends, peers, and work acquaintances. Were there specific members of your family or your social support system that encouraged you to go to college and helped you through the transition into college? What did they do to help?

2. Another common idea that emerged during the first round of interviews was the importance of positive role models. Can you describe important role models—either within your family or in other parts of your life—that were important to you as you decided to attend college? What traits about that role model do you find most motivating?

Follow up: Is there someone at the college (a professor, a staff person, an employee) with whom you have been able to form a positive, supportive relationship? Tell me a little about that relationship, how it formed, and how that person has helped you with your college experience.

3. Especially at community colleges, everyone begins at different levels of academic preparedness. When you started your college courses, did you feel that you were academically well prepared? If yes, where did you learn the skills and strategies that were effective? If no, what strategies or techniques did you use to make it through and succeed in your classes?

4. As you transitioned into the college experience, do you remember using any “survival tactics” or “success strategies” from other parts of your life to make it through challenges? What were some of the strategies you used, and how were they helpful?

5. Another important idea that emerged during the first round of interviews was “good teachers vs. bad teachers.” Several people used exactly that phrase. As a college student, what makes a teacher a “good teacher”? What are some of the strategies, techniques or traits you really appreciate in your “good teachers”?

The flip side: What are some of the strategies, techniques or traits you really don’t like in “bad teachers”? In others words, what are some of the things you would like your professors to know that perhaps they don’t?

6. As you know, one of the main ideas in my study is “working class students.” I haven’t provided an explanation of what I mean by that term because I want to get an idea of what it means to you. How would you define the term “working class”? What does that term mean to you?

Follow Up: Do you feel this college does a good job of providing support for working-class students? What strategies, policies or processes could the college adopt to make it more practical or positive for working-class students?
7. The other big idea in my study is “working-class male students.” Again, I did not discuss issues of male-ness or masculinity in our first interview because I wanted to see if those terms came up during your description of your experiences. As a male student, have you felt that people judged you based on your male-ness in any positive or negative ways? Have you experienced any negativity from your professors, staff people, or other students at the college based on your gender? Please describe.