
5-26-2019

“I Wanted to Know More”: A Narrative Exploration of Community College Students’ Goals and Aspirations

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Recommended APA Citation

VanOra, J. P. (2019). “I Wanted to Know More”: A Narrative Exploration of Community College Students’ Goals and Aspirations. *The Qualitative Report*, 24(5), 1168-1180. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2019.3961>

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Abstract

The literature on community colleges is overwhelmed by outcomes-oriented data concerning retention, attrition, and graduation rates. What we lack is a more complete understanding of why community college students choose to enroll in the first place. The current study seeks to fill this gap. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, students reported feeling motivated to attend community college by their desires to reconstruct themselves as scholars, make proud their families and communities of origin, achieve social mobility, and develop a more accomplished and purposeful sense of self. Implications of these findings for teaching and learning are discussed, as is the importance of using identity as a lens for understanding students’ motivations.

Keywords

Community College, Narratives, Qualitative Research, Developmental Education, Aspirations, Goals, Motivations, Identity

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support of Dr. Emily Schnee for her participation in the current project.

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The literature on community colleges is overwhelmed by outcomes-oriented data concerning retention, attrition, and graduation rates. What we lack is a more complete understanding of why community college students choose to enroll in the first place. The current study seeks to fill this gap. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, students reported feeling motivated to attend community college by their desires to reconstruct themselves as scholars, make proud their families and communities of origin, achieve social mobility, and develop a more accomplished and purposeful sense of self. Implications of these findings for teaching and learning are discussed, as is the importance of using identity as a lens for understanding students’ motivations. Keywords: Community College, Narratives, Qualitative Research, Developmental Education, Aspirations, Goals, Motivations, Identity

Background

The literature on community colleges is overwhelmed by outcomes-oriented data concerning retention, attrition, and graduation rates (Bailey, Calgano, Jenkins, Leinback, & Kienzi, 2006; Fike & Fike, 2008; Levin & Calgano, 2008; Price & Tovar, 2014). And this is with good reason. It appears that only approximately 22% of community college students earn an associate’s degree within three years and that this number only increases to 38% when examining graduation rates over the course of six years (Juszkiewicz, 2016). In fact, for an alarming number of community colleges in the United States, the three-year graduation rates are lower than 15% (Schneider & Yin, 2012). First-to-second year retention rates are of equal concern with reportedly 55% of community college students persisting beyond their first academic year (Price & Tovar, 2014). Not surprisingly, these outcomes appear worse for students who place into developmental or “remedial” coursework (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006; Bailey, 2009; Bailey, Crosta, & Jenkins, 2007; Crosta & Calcagno, 2005; Merisotis & Phipps, 2000). In fact, Adelman (1999) finds that students taking remedial courses are almost 30% less likely to earn a bachelor’s degree.¹

And yet, despite the abysmal outcomes described above, there is evidence that with support, guidance, and pedagogy tailored to students’ individual needs, these outcomes can be improved even for those students with the most significant academic challenges (Grubb, 1999; Tinto, 1998, 2003; Weiss et al., 2015). In fact, providing opportunities for civic engagement, using technology to facilitate learning, and structuring more regular communication between students and their advisors appear to help community college students persist over time (O’Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009; Schnee, Better, & Cummings, 2015; Symister, VanOra, Griffin, & Troy, 2014). Having the potentially greatest impact on community college students’ success are learning community (LC) programs, which enroll a

¹ It is critical to acknowledge evidence that lack of adequate preparation in high school, rather than remediation per se, causes these poorer outcomes among developmental students (Adelman, 1999; Attewell et al., 2006).

common cohort of students in “linked” or “clustered” courses and require more collaboration, interdisciplinary thinking, and active constructions of knowledge than traditional, stand-alone classes in community college (Tinto, 1998; Weiss et al., 2015). With these possibilities in mind, as well as a belief in the importance of community colleges in providing access to those students who have been historically underrepresented in higher education, many scholar-practitioners continue striving for additional ways to help community college students succeed.

The Current Study

In this study, I aim to fill a gap in the literature concerning community college students’ motivations for attending college. Despite the research cited above, we know relatively little about what motivates community college students to enroll in the first place (Edman & Brazil, 2007; Habley, Bloom, & Robins, 2012; Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014). Because we do not yet know *why* students choose to attend community college, we remain limited in our capacities to help them overcome the multiple challenges that they encounter in their journeys through higher education (McCormick, Schnee, & VanOra, 2014; Sternglass, 1997; VanOra, 2012). Therefore, in the current study, I seek to reveal the goals and aspirations motivating students’ persistence in community college and to consider the implications of this knowledge for teaching and learning within the community college classroom.

Before moving forward, it is critical to acknowledge who I am and what I bring to this study of community college students’ goals and aspirations. As a Social/Personality Psychologist and faculty member at Kingsborough Community College, I have spent the past ten years teaching and learning from the students in my classes. From the outset, I have been in awe of their resiliency, insights, boldness, and tenacity. They bring critical insights into the psychological concepts I teach and compel me to think deeply about both the potentials and limitations of my discipline, particularly for those living within conditions of injustice. On a more personal level, I identify, sometimes painfully, with my students’ lived experiences. Many of my students and I have survived early childhood loss and trauma which have left us both wounded and (potentially) more empathic to others’ needs and struggles. Many of my students and I have faced various forms of discrimination, mine centering on sexual identity and theirs based on race, gender, sexuality, immigration status, (mis)perceived ability levels, and religion. Many of my students and I grew up doubting our intellectual abilities and wondering whether there would be a place for us in higher education. These multiple forms of identification open up opportunities for teaching, connection, and healing, and certainly create challenges when it comes to assessment and grading. Through my research, I seek to honor students’ life stories and support their success in community college. I hope that my work leads to pedagogical, curricular, and structural interventions that facilitate community college students’ persistence despite numerous obstacles. Above all, I attempt to document the many strengths and “wisdoms” that community college students bring to the classroom, forcefully refuting the idea that these students lack the intellectual fortitude needed to earn a college degree and become agents of social change.

Methodology

A Narrative Approach

In the current study, I did not seek to test hypotheses or identify correlates between variables. Rather, I sought to explore why students attend community college and what we

can learn from their stories. To accomplish this, I needed to employ the sort of qualitative methodology that would aid me in understanding how students make sense of their lived experiences. Keeping in mind that *listening closely* to the ongoing and internalized stories people tell about their lives is often the best way to learn what it feels like to live in a particular social setting and contend with various obstacles, I chose a narrative approach (Chase, 2003; Josselson, 2009; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Singer, 2001). As Singer (2001) tells us, narratives reveal the “phenomenological texture” of a person’s lived experiences, “defining whom and how we love, for what and why we work, and where all that we have done in our lives should ultimately lead us” (p. 273). Narratives also enable us to recognize the critical complexity of individuals’ experiences, underscoring both what is common to all as well as what appears unique and distinctive (Josselson, 1993).

The narrative approach I utilized involved conducting semi-structured, relational interviews in which participants collaborated with me in structuring the interview, often taking the lead as our discourse developed (Josselson, 2013). As much as possible, I invited participants to share specific stories with me, rather than generalized abstractions, recognizing that we learn more about social and cultural phenomena by examining how people *use, resist, and transform these* in personal narratives (Chase, 2003). Overall, these narrative strategies enabled me, both during the interview and the interpretive process, to connect rather than distance myself from participants and to tell a story about what I believe I have learned about their lives and experiences (Josselson, 1993, 2009).

Recruitment

Before recruitment for the study commenced, Kingsborough Community College’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved all aspects of the study. I conducted this study with my co-principal investigator, Dr. Emily Schnee, an urban educator who specializes in teaching English Composition to community college students who have been designated as “underprepared” for college-level reading and writing. Each of us conducted half of the interviews for the current study. Both Dr. Schnee and I recruited participants in students’ developmental reading and writing classes and via student email distribution lists. In both the recruitment speech and emails, we said,

In this study, we aim to understand more about why you chose to enroll in community college and what you need to be successful. We are also interested in learning anything you have to share about your experiences, both within and outside of the college classroom.

We compensated students with a \$25 Barnes & Noble gift card which was made available through internal funding at Kingsborough Community College. Before beginning each individual interview, we reminded participants about the focus of the study and expressed the hope that these interviews would “feel like a conversation” guided by each participant’s interests and experiences. We reiterated that we would maintain each participant’s confidentiality and that they should feel free to stop the interview or take a break at any time. We also agreed to remove from the transcripts any information that participants did not want us to draw upon in the analysis. Once participants asked any clarifying questions and reconfirmed their willingness to participate, we asked them to sign an official consent form so that we could begin the interview.

Sample

The sample consisted of fifteen students (6 women, 9 men), all of whom tested into the lowest levels of reading and writing at Kingsborough Community College. My co-principal investigator and I interviewed each student individually. At the time of the interviews, all students were between 18 and 30 years of age and had recently completed their first semester at the college. Six students identified as white, three as Black or African American, one as Asian, one as biracial, and four as either Black or White Latino(a). All but three spoke English as their native language. Before beginning the analysis phase of the project, I assigned all participants pseudonyms which I use throughout this paper.

Narrative Interview

Both my co-principal investigator and I conducted half of the interviews at the conclusion of students' first semesters of college. Each individual interview lasted approximately one hour. Interview questions included:

- Can you explain some of the reasons that you choose to attend college?
- Can you tell me a bit about what you hope to accomplish as a student and/or after your graduate?
- Can you tell me a story about a positive experience you have had in college?
- Can you tell me about a negative or unpleasant experience that you have had in college?
- Can you tell me about your experiences in developmental, or "remedial" coursework?
- What else would you like me to know about you?

As discussed earlier, these questions often served as a starting point from which students constructed their own "narrative styles," employing whatever structure most authentically adhered to their lived experiences (Chase, 2003; Josselson, 2013). Both Dr. Schnee and I transcribed the interviews and interpreted them individually.

Data Analysis

As mentioned, I employed a narrative approach to the analysis of the qualitative data conducted for this study (Wertz et al., 2011). This entailed multiple readings of the entire data set with a focus on those narrative features that were both shared and distinctive across interviews. Following, I coded explicitly for any excerpts addressing students' goals for attending community college. Some of the codes I developed included scholarship, intellectual curiosity, mobility, family, pride, overcoming failure, personal history, emotional pain, and desire. Based on frequency of codes, as well as my larger interest in students' goals and aspirations, I combined the majority of these codes into four overarching themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). These themes included: 1) motivations to (re) construct one's self as a scholar; 2) motivations to make one's family proud; 3) motivations for social mobility; and 4) motivations to develop a more accomplished and purposeful sense of self. To ensure that the themes I developed accurately reflected what students revealed in their narratives, I de-identified the transcripts and asked a colleague familiar with qualitative research, but unfamiliar with the premises of the current study, to read a subsample of interviews and identify what he saw as the "central issues emerging from these interviews." Although he

framed them differently, he confirmed the four central themes that I identified. I also returned to a subsample of student participants and asked them to confirm and/or critique these four central themes. Although these students encouraged me to elaborate upon aspects of their interviews that went beyond the scope of this paper, they also confirmed the validity of the four themes outlined above.

Findings

Motivations to (Re)construct One's Self as a Scholar

In almost every interview, students described feeling motivated by opportunities to reimagine themselves as scholars who were deeply committed to grappling with critical ideas across disciplines. In contrast to more traditional conceptions of community college students as motivated exclusively by the desire to earn a degree and increase their earning potential, participants in the current study expressed a deep commitment to *learning for learning's sake* and understanding themselves as in dialogue with a larger community of scholars (Cox, 2009; Weis, 1985). For example, Amir declares that he “always puts more into classes [that he] enjoy[s]” and during his first semester “read books that [he] didn't have to read [for class], like William James' book.” Similarly, Norma illuminates the variety of courses that have helped her grow intellectually including psychology which has helped her “try to understand people,” philosophy which helps her to feel “wiser” and better able to “pick apart people's ideas and debate,” and history which she is just “really curious about.” Norma also proclaims that upon the completion of her first semester in community college she “feel[s] like [she is] actually learning, that [she] know[s] stuff, [and she] feel[s] smart.” Additionally, Dimitri asserts that community college provides a vehicle for conceiving himself as a more educated and knowledgeable person. He tells us:

So now I'm in college to get more educated. You know, to just, to just have knowledge of things. . . . I don't think it's about grades, actually. I, I feel like it's more about what you learn, like for yourself, not for anything else, you know. Even if I got a C in a class, I know what I learned out of that class. . . . And that, that's more important to me than the B or A is. It [is] just the whole learning process.

Alongside others, Aaron confirms that his desire to learn and grow intellectually supersedes more financial motivations for attending college. When discussing his reasons for a biology major, Aaron tells us:

[The] number one reason [is] because I like learning about the body. Like, if I sit down with a bunch of people, I like talking about, things about the body and things like that. . . . Like, it's something that [I] like doing, you know it's not like, [I] don't do things because of the money. Cause this is something you gotta do for the rest of your life, so do something that you like.

Maria's motivation to *become an intellectual* via her enrollment in community college was reinforced when she had the opportunity to reflect on how much she has learned in the course of a single semester and to demonstrate her newfound knowledge for friends and family. She says:

Like I wanted to know more. I didn't know anything before, I just knew basic things. Like now, the other day my friend said something about sleep, and I was like, "the pons makes you sleep." I used that and she was like "okay, smarty pants," and I'm like, "that's me!"

This sort of intrinsic motivation to learn or become a "master" of one's craft, has consistently been identified as critical to students' persistence. Thus, as I discuss below, we might find additional ways to nurture it in our classrooms (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

Motivations to Make One's Family Proud

Consistent with research conducted by Martin, Galentino, and Townsend (2014), the sense of pride that students felt about their newfound scholarly identities was deeply connected to the pride expressed by their families and communities of origin. These students, most of whom were the first in their families to attend college, affirmed that their parents embarked upon this educational journey with them, vicariously experiencing both the joys and challenges. Juan Carlos affirms, "My mom, you know, my mom is happy [I am in college] and you know, I'm happy to see her happy that I'm doing good, you know." Kareem confirms these parental sentiments when he describes a scene in which his father "just started crying" at how proud he was of his son's college attendance. Additionally, Eduardo describes his mother's pride and vicarious sense of accomplishment: "I want to make my mom happy, so she can see that, you know, she didn't go to college, and to see her own son do it, it makes her happy." Similarly, Elif, a relatively new language learner from Uzbekistan, discussed the incredible triumph with which both her family and other community members associate attending college in the United States. She says:

Actually, when I got in college, I was very proud of myself, because I would always like, dream to study in college in the United States. . . . And it was like, big proud (sic) for me and for my family. . . . And like, when somebody sees me from my friends, they begin to ask, how is college and I give them advice, what to do and. . . I feel good that I'm in college. You know it's like, one of my friends said that you get education in the United States you have like, gold lottery in your hand.

Motivations for Social Mobility

In addition to students' conceptualizations of community college as a vehicle for reconstructing themselves as scholars, they also spoke incisively about their commitments to achieving social mobility (Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014). For example, Maria says, "I wanted to have a good job, and I figured . . . you have to have a college degree in order to have a good job . . . I figured let me just get a degree, find a decent job and then I'll go from there." Similarly, Juan Carlos reports that one reason for attending college was "a good job, you know . . . making a good amount of money. The American Dream basically." Both Joshua and Adam declared that they plan to major in nursing because of the imagined financial security with which they associate this profession. When asked to elaborate on his choice of nursing, Adams declares that "nurses get paid really well . . . there [are] never enough nurses . . . that is one demand that will always stay . . . and that's why I chose it, I just want to have a secure future." Joshua concurs, affirming that he aspires to become a nurse because "with nursing you get like \$70,000, right away when you get out of college . . . there is a lot of work for nurses."

It is critical to acknowledge that these financial goals were also relational ones, grounded largely in the hope that with greater resources, students would be better able to care for their family members. Eduardo tells us:

And I want to do college [because] I want to have a better future for my mother too. My goals are to have a house, to go on vacation, things like that . . . because then you get a better job and everything . . . and make money [to take care of] my family, basically, not only just my mom. My brothers too.

Interestingly, many students discussed community college as a means of supporting not only their families of origin but also those that they hope to create in the future. Michael tells us:

Let's say you have a family, let's say you have a girlfriend or a wife, but you have a baby on the way. . . . You're not gonna make, you're not gonna be able to support the three of you all. So you want to go to college and get as much as you can . . . so you can be able to have a place for the three of you all. To support you and the family. Not just yourself [but also] the two other people.

Dimitri's desires for the resources needed to support his imagined family of the future parallel Michael's. Yet Dimitri also believes that by earning a college degree, he will become more competitive for jobs that do not require intense physical labor. Having worked construction and mechanical jobs for the past ten years, Dimitri reports feeling more tired than he would like, being only 28 years of age. He tell us:

I just had to go back to school because no matter where I looked for a job, you needed a certain degree. . . . I've been through physical labor. I've done plenty. And when I get older . . . I want to home with the wife and kids at night time. . . . I want to work hard, but not do not physical labor. And get good money for it, you know . . . I don't picture myself driving a garbage truck or working in a mechanic shop . . . not saying that it's a bad thing, but that's not where I want to be.

Motivations to Develop a More Accomplished and Purposeful Sense of Self

Across interviews, students also reported that community college afforded them an opportunity to reconstruct themselves with a greater sense of purpose and accomplishment. The majority of students asserted that prior to attending college they felt stagnated, needing to revise both the directions of their lives as well as their conceptions of self. For example, Jennifer declares:

Well, my reason for coming [to college], I just, I felt like I wasn't doing anything with my life. I was kind of at a point that I felt really stuck. So I felt that maybe if I started somewhere, I can always do better and go somewhere with my life. . . . I felt like I wasn't doing anything and it, it was actually ruining me emotionally. Now that I'm here I actually feel a lot better, and I actually want to do something with my life.

Kareem concurs, proclaiming that by attending college, he "feels better about [him]self": "I am doing something with myself . . . I used to get up and not do nothing with myself. . . . I really enjoy going to school because I have something to look forward to." For some

students, this sense of purpose and accomplishment was focused squarely on the desire to help others and “give back.” Aaron, a young man from Guyana, reports that with college, he now has a concrete plan for supporting his community by one day providing those critical medical services that are often out of reach to the members of his community of origin.

Aaron: Perhaps I could help some people. . . . Cause I remember there’s one doctor who used to always help people who had [illnesses]. Doctors were so expensive, but she always gave you a reduced price when you go. She takes good care of you.

Interviewer: It sounds like whatever you choose, you want to be able to make a contribution in your home country. And help people.

Aaron: Yes, I want to help people. I like helping people, you know.

It is worth noting that students’ sense of pride and accomplishment at beginning their college careers was inextricably linked with working hard toward their degrees. This contradicts previous research, which often describes community college (or similarly “underprepared”) students as simply unwilling and/or unable to do the work needed to achieve their goals (Clydesdale, 2007; Cox, 2009). Norma declares unequivocally:

Like, I have to work for my degree. Otherwise, it doesn’t mean anything to me. So, if I get my degree here, and it was also easy to get it, I’m gonna feel horrible. . . . I’m gonna feel like I didn’t work. Like, I have to work. I have to earn it . . . if this comes easy, it just doesn’t feel real to me.

Discussion

As mentioned previously, there is a gap in the literature concerning community college students’ motivations (Edman & Brazil, 2007). In response, this study identified four central motivators which included students’ desires to reconstruct themselves as scholars, make proud their families and communities of origin, achieve social mobility, and develop a more accomplished and purposeful sense of self. Briefly, I discuss the implications of these findings for future research, as well as for our pedagogical endeavors.

One central finding of this study concerned students’ conceptions of community college as an opportunity to develop a sense of themselves as scholars. This defies more traditional understandings of community college students as motivated exclusively by the desire for vocational training and greater earning potential. Moreover, it highlighted the *intrinsic motivation*, or a desire for *learning for learning’s sake*, that students bring into the community college classroom—a factor that has long been identified as contributing to persistence-based efforts (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Thus we might consider how to nurture this over time and reconsider pedagogical strategies that unwittingly attenuate students’ more intrinsic desires to learn. Many instructors, in an effort to compel students’ reading and mastery of course content, assess students’ understanding frequently in the form of quizzes, exams, and graded assignments; I theorize that this does our students a disservice, sending a message that the goal is to pass the class, rather than learning and growing as a scholar. In fact, by overstating the importance of grades, we might be leaving students to feel that unless they are being formally assessed or “rewarded,” there is no reason to do more than the minimum.² I offer this as a partial explanation for why, despite the enthusiasm for learning

² This is consistent with classical social psychological findings on the “overjustification effect.” According to this research, externally motivating rewards and punishments often undermine individuals’ intrinsic desires to perform a task and/or master a new ability (Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973).

students articulated upon the conclusion of their first semesters, overall persistence and graduation rates remain alarmingly low (Price & Tovar, 2014). An alternative model, proposed by Danielewicz and Elbow (2009), offers students a contract at the beginning of the semester, guaranteeing a B to all students who complete the basic requirements, which are laid out clearly before them. While some worry that this will disincentivize students from working hard, there is evidence that this system has the opposite effect, inspiring students to *work harder* in their quests for knowledge, without having their inherent curiosities attenuated by external motivators.

Of course, students' intrinsic motivations to learn were balanced by their fervent hopes that community college would provide access to social mobility and greater financial freedom. While many of us have conceived of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations as mutually exclusive binaries, this research highlights the "on the ground" reality that these are both aspects of students' selves which can be articulated in coherent dialogue (Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992). In other words, it appears that students feel an urgency to grow as a scholar *and* obtain the resources needed to care for their loved ones. From my perspective, this is all the more reason to provide the sort of contract that enables students to feel secure that they will "pass" so that the majority of the semester can be spent engaging in ideas and cultivating a more formidable intellectual identity.

The current study also has implications for how we conceive of the role of others in the academic journeys of community college students. In contrast to research conducted by Roberts and Rosenwald (2001) which indicated the importance of separation among first-generation college students attempting to earn a college degree, this research highlights the importance of *keeping family members close* in students' academic endeavors. Across interviews, students described the pride felt by their parents as a motivator for persistence and their commitments to social mobility as inspired by the desire to care for their families. Thus we might invite these friends and family members to visit our classes and become members of our larger community. We might also open up opportunities for students to journal about the importance of their families (or communities of origin) and to underscore the ways that attending college enables them to serve as a role model for loved ones who might otherwise have seen college as out of reach. Alternatively, instructors might ask students to interview family and/or community members and to draw upon these interviews as one text upon which they compose an essay. When it comes to including students' families and communities, less important than how we do it, is that we do it. By including families and communities of origin and reinforcing the sense that students' journeys are both shared and relational, we strengthen community college students' sense of belonging and, ideally, their capacities to persist.

Finally, it is worth acknowledging that although I did not intend to conduct a study so explicitly focused on students' identities, almost every motivation that students articulated was connected with their desires to explore, reconstruct, and/or reimagine some aspect of self. Moreover, I found that students were calling on us not only to understand who they are now, but also whom they strive to become. This became especially clear as I listened to the following excerpt from Jennifer.

I'm exploring who I am, like, who am I? Like, like, what am I? Like, what is my significance in life? Like, how do I describe myself to someone else? Like, I'm this and I'm that, I love this, and I love that, and it's like, well, I can say a couple of things, but not really that much, so, I need to work on that.

How might I attempt to explain these community college students' overwhelming focus on identity within their narratives despite the fact that this was not intended to be a central aspect

of this study? I offer a few possibilities. First, there is little doubt that when we elicit an individual's story, we are going to learn a great deal about her/his (multiple) selves and identities, regardless of our research questions and goals (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Singer, 2001). In fact, every story we tell adds a new layer to our narrative identity which continues to evolve over time. Additionally, these students were all between 18 and 30 years old, a developmental juncture at which identity challenges become central (Erikson, 1994; Josselson, 1996). For that reason alone, I should not be surprised that the majority of participants constructed identity-based narratives. Moreover, as a Social and Personality Psychologist, I am probably *always* on the lookout for stories of self and identity—whether I realize it or not.

Finally, I believe that students' focus on identity stems at least in part from the fact that students *want* to tell us who they are. Maybe the overarching message of their narratives, beyond all the themes, is: "If you are going to understand my motivations and support my academic success, you first need to know *me*." This finding might lead us to conduct research that more deliberately brings together the literatures about community college students with some of the classic and contemporary writings about self and identity (Erikson, 1994; Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003; Marcia, 1966; McAdams, 2008). By purposefully using identity as a lens for understanding motivation, we might find ourselves better equipped to reveal what has yet to be discovered about community college students *and* support them in their persistence-based efforts.

In conclusion, students appear highly motivated to attend community college. The current study revealed this to be true not only about the "average" community college student but also those deemed most "at risk" via their placement in the lowest level of developmental English. The question that remains is the following: If students enter with such robust and unequivocal motivations to earn a college credential, then why do persistence and graduation rates remain so abysmally low? What challenges, in particular, impede our students from reaching their goals? I call on my research colleagues to continue taking up these questions in our attempts to assist community college students evolve as scholars, achieve social mobility, and earn their college degrees.

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I would like to acknowledge the support of Dr. Emily Schnee for her participation in the current project.

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Article Citation

VanOra, J. P. (2019). “I wanted to know more”: A narrative exploration of community college students’ goals and aspirations. *The Qualitative Report*, 24(5), 1168-1180. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol24/iss5/16>
