Start, Start Again: The College Pathways of Economically-Vulnerable Mothers

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Start, Start Again:
The College Pathways of Economically-Vulnerable Mothers

A dissertation presented

by

Nicole Marie Deterding

to

The Committee on Higher Degrees in Social Policy

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Start, Start Again: The College Pathways of Economically-Vulnerable Mothers

ABSTRACT

How do returning college students navigate the rapidly diversifying landscape of higher education options available to them today? Adopting a life course perspective, I argue that the college persistence of non-traditional students must be understood within historical, institutional, and personal context. I use longitudinal survey data from approximately 750 respondents and 130 in-depth life history interviews from over 100 participants in the Resilience in Survivors of Katrina (RISK) Project to document college decision-making leading up to and following 2005’s Hurricane Katrina. Using mixed methods, I outline the limitations of traditional measures for capturing the winding college pathways and future college plans of America’s most disadvantaged college students. I also contribute to an emerging literature on mixed-methods data analysis in social science research.

I find remarkable levels of persistent college aspiration and enrollment, long past normative time to degree and far into young adulthood. The diverse institutional landscape of non-selective postsecondary education offers many opportunities for a return to college, but also complicates the pathway to earning a credential. I describe how these economically-vulnerable students understand the meaning and value of a college degree, finding that economic necessity and the positive moral valence of college-going combine to support continued aspiration. While the logic of human capital investment dominates policy and academic discussions of college’s value, I find the symbolic meaning of a college degree also shapes aspirations and decision-making into
adulthood, particularly for the students who struggle the most. For these students, “valuing” a college degree involves both economic and moral calculations.
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thought more broadly and deeply about what the RISK data mean. Victoria Harman’s research assistance gave me momentum I needed. And getting to know the psychologists of the Rhodes Lab offered experience in interdisciplinary work in practice. I’m particularly grateful for the rich qualitative data collected by the RISK Project interviewers: Beth Fussell, Petrice Sams-Abiodun, Stacey Bosick, Eva Rosen, Christian Chan, Megan Reid, Liza Zwiebach, and Sarah Lowe.

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In October 2014, Harvard President Drew Faust spoke to a crowd of high school students assembled at the Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Dallas, Texas. To the assembled group of racially diverse, academically and artistically high-performing young people, President Faust outlined what she called “The Case for College” (Faust 2014). Acknowledging popular worries over whether college-going is a good investment in today’s tough economy, Faust responded with a resounding yes. By means of evidence, she outlined not only the well-known economic rationale for a college degree—a focus on individual economic returns associated with college attainment—but also a broader set of considerations and measures. Education, she argued, has long been the foundation for American democracy and citizenship in addition to a driver of individual and national economic success. She concluded thus:

"I have called this speech “the case for college” because I believe that college changes lives. It opens opportunities, reflected in the statistics I recited earlier. Perhaps even more important, it opens minds and worlds—in ways that stretch us—almost pull us—to become different people. I often ask students as they are approaching graduation how they are different from when they arrived at college. They say they know more. They frequently say they found a passion they had never imagined—a field, a profession to which they intend to devote their lives. But what is most important, they often tell me, is that they have a new way of approaching the world, through the power of learning, analyzing, changing to adapt to what they’ve come to understand. And so I leave you with a question: “Who can you be? Do you want to be that?” Wherever you go, whatever you do next, take up that challenge. Ask that question. You deserve no less."

In making the case for college, President Faust argues that college changes lives. A college degree is not just an economic investment, but also a chance to become a different person, to experience how broad and open the world can be. Her speech concludes with
a question, and the question is not “what do you want to be” but “Who can you be?” The bright young people before her, she concludes, deserve nothing less than a full consideration of the possibilities that lie before them.

This framing of the case for college appeared in the context of halting economic recovery and an increasingly divided public conversation about the value of a college degree. Perhaps it’s no surprise that the president of one of America’s elite universities extolls the value of attending college. But her case for college also obscures an important reality: the kind of education to which Faust refers—one that affords the space and time to open minds and marshals the resources and support guaranteed to open doors—remains a luxury granted to a relative few of American college students.

While romanticized notions of college-going evoke bright young people in ivy-covered buildings and late night philosophical discussions with dorm-mates, only the minority of American students today follows a traditional pathway to a bachelor’s degree, defined by earning a high school diploma; enrolling full-time the semester following high school graduation; depending on parents for financial support; and not working or only working part-time during the school year (Choy 2002). Only twenty-five percent of undergraduates are enrolled full-time at a four-year residential college; the other three-quarters attend school while balancing a complicated set of economic and personal responsibilities with their studies. These men and women—disproportionately disadvantaged racial minorities, typically lower-income, often beyond traditional college-age, and many first-generation college-goers—are the commuter students at our local community colleges. They are those who attend courses online, never to actually sit in a classroom of peers. And they are those who spend nights and weekends, over a period of
long years, attending a series of technical training programs that too often fail to result in
the living-wage work they seek. Far from the ivy-covered walls of elite four year
colleges, these are the students who attend class in under-resourced public institutions or
for-profit education centers located in office buildings or strip malls, strategically located
near highway exit ramps to ease the commutes of busy working adults. They are the
students that the popular imagination, major higher education policy initiatives, and the
researchers studying American inequality too-often overlook. They are the focus of this
work.

In this mixed-method longitudinal study using data from Resilience in Survivors
of Katrina (RISK) Project (described in detail below), I provide an in-depth look at the
college pathways of a group of economically vulnerable mothers enrolled in two
Louisiana community colleges. The parents entered our study as they sought to (re)enroll
in college in Fall 2003. I observe their educational journeys over a period of five years,
following them as Hurricane Katrina temporarily closes their colleges and displaces
many from their neighborhoods and families. Combining data from longitudinal surveys
and in-depth life history interviews, I provide descriptive and interpretive accounts of
their remarkably persistent college aspirations over time and the role that college-going
plays in their lives.

What pathways through the higher education landscape emerge when this group
of adult students confronts decisions about whether, when, and how to re-enroll? How do
they understand “the case for college”? I argue that, while Hurricane Katrina required,
for many, a literal rebuilding of their homes and lives, these young women have long
needed to build and rebuild a sense of self in the face of the struggles that accompany
teenage motherhood and poverty. By situating their experiences in the context of broader transitions to adulthood, I underline the importance of college enrollment as a narrative tool and practical source of agency as the women seek economic stability and the dignity afforded to economically independent adults in an era of otherwise-declining social supports for struggling families. At the same time, the changing landscape of open door higher education raises the stakes for the most vulnerable among them in ways that we are only beginning to understand.

I. COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND THE NEW OPEN DOOR LANDSCAPE

While four-year colleges and universities receive much of the attention from sociologists of education, 40% of American undergraduates attend one of the nation’s public “open door” institutions, community colleges. In 2011, 7.1 million students were enrolled one of 1,047 two-year public community colleges. With their open access model—students are admitted without regard to their prior academic performance—and relatively low tuitions, community colleges are widely touted by advocates as a “gateway to opportunity” (American Association of Community Colleges 2014). Historically, this was the community college’s role: the sector developed and grew throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as the GI Bill, women’s entry into the labor market, the civil rights movement, and an expanding American economy all demanded a concomitant expansion of higher education and training (Brint and Karabel 1989, Dougherty 1994).

Building on this legacy, two-year colleges today enroll 32% of White undergraduates, but 55% of Black and 50% of Hispanic undergraduate students (US Dept. of Education 2013). As a group, community college students are more likely to be
low-income, Black or Hispanic, female, and over age 22 than the general college population (US Dept. of Education 2013). For a large proportion of disadvantaged undergraduates, community college is the first encounter with higher education, if not the last.

Despite the rhetoric of opportunity, some observers have dubbed community college “the contradictory college,” as myriad institutional demands divide the resources allocated to academically-focused transfer tracks (Dougherty 1994). On one hand, community colleges are positioned as a cost-effective way for students to complete the first two years of a bachelor’s degree. On the other, community colleges are tasked with a variety of other roles, offering remedial coursework and adult education for students with poor academic skills; a source of the applied technical training required for skilled professions; and an opportunity for return and retraining for adults who may have been out of school for many years. Given these varied roles, community college students’ attendance patterns vary widely, from full-time attendance to one or two courses taken in a short enrollment spell. Over half of first-time students enter hoping to transfer to a four-year university\(^1\), but timely degree completion is not the norm: within six years of first enrolling, only one in three community college entrants completes any kind of credential (Bailey et al. 2006). Given that the majority of students in community colleges fail to meet their goals in a timely matter, critics suggest these institutions are more accurately described as sites of “the diverted dream” (Brint and Karabel 1989) than

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\(^1\) Depending on the measure, estimates of transfer intention vary widely. Conservatively, the National Center for Education Statistics measures transfer intent by the coursework that students are enrolled in. By that measure, 52% of beginning community college students are on a transfer track (Horn and Weko 2009). Alternately, using beginning students’ self-reported degree attainment goals, two-thirds of community college entrants hoped to earn a Bachelor’s degree or higher (Provasnik and Planty 2008).
engines of mobility. For too many students—particularly those who are academically, economically, and racially disadvantaged—the open doors of community college instead become a revolving door of entry and exit without earning a degree or credential.

For-Profit Institutions and the New Open Door Landscape

In recent years, community colleges have faced growing competition for returning students as private, for-profit education became the fastest-growing segment of the American postsecondary system. Between 2000 and 2010, undergraduate enrollment at for-profit institutions increased by 634 percent, from three to ten percent of the total American undergraduate population (NCES 2013). For-profit colleges now grant a substantial proportion of two-year degrees: by 2012, one in five associate’s degrees was earned from a for-profit institution (NCES 2013). Marketing for these institutions emphasizes the improved employment outcomes of their graduates (Campbell and Deil-Amen 2012), and their students appear willing to invest large sums of money in hopes of improving their labor market opportunities. The average for-profit associate’s degree program costs multiple times—as much as fifteen times—that of a comparable local community college (GAO 2010).

The policy shift away from public institutions towards private, market solutions is part of a broader trend in many realms of American social policy. In her political history of the rise of the for-profit sector, Degrees of Inequality, political scientist Suzanne Mettler points out that “Ironically, despite being regarded as part of the private sector, the for-profits are financed almost entirely by American taxpayers” (Mettler 2014:2). For-profit institutions enroll about one in ten college students, but utilize twenty five percent of the money that is allocated through Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965, the
primarily source of federal student aid. For-profit institutions also receive 37% of all post-9/11 GI Bill benefits and half of Department of Defense tuition assistance benefits.

Within the higher education marketplace, for-profit education has positioned itself as meeting the demands for mid-career education of older students and displaced workers at a time when social and economic returns to education are at, or near, historical highs (Goldin and Katz 2007; Hout 2012) and within growing cultural and economic imperatives for “lifelong learning” (Kasworm 2012). In addition to citing the perceived low quality of many community colleges, advocates of for-profit education argue that these institutions offer features for busy working adults that traditional community college cannot, including flexible schedules, online course offerings, and year-round programs. Given this specialization, for-profit and community college populations do not completely overlap; for-profits draw a population of students that is even more disadvantaged than average students at public 2-year institutions in terms of age, race, income, and academic preparation (Deming, Goldin, and Katz 2012). The student population at for-profits also includes a large proportion of students who have had prior unsuccessful attempts at higher education (Campbell and Deil-Amen 2012).

As a group, for-profits offer returning adult learners many and varied options that may be difficult to distinguish from one another—and from community college programs. For-profit higher education includes both large branded chains (in 2008-09, 532,000 students were enrolled at University of Phoenix Online Campus) and smaller, regional or single-campus institutions. These institutions offer a range of online and “brick and mortar” delivery methods, and sometimes a mix of the two (Deming, Goldin, and Katz 2012). Prior to their recent growth, for-profit institutions focused on technical
certification programs such as cosmetology or medical assisting, while more academic programs were left to public and private non-profit institutions. But lately, offerings have expanded to include bachelors, masters and PhD degrees (GAO 2010). Still, rather than offer general programs that prepare students to continue at higher levels of education, for-profits primarily offer career-focused vocational or trade programs.

Returning Students Navigating the New Open Door Landscape

For returning adult learners, for-profit and community colleges make up what I dub the “New Open Door Landscape,” where barriers to entry are low and offerings are varied and quickly-evolving. The expansion and diversification of non-selective higher education raise important questions about how this institutional landscape stratifies opportunity and students’ likelihood of successful completion. How do returning students—particularly the disadvantaged populations drawn to these institutions—navigate their changing menu of college options? Do new pathways through college emerge as a result? We know that for-profit institutions are increasingly a part of the college careers of adult learners and returning students, and receive a heavy public investment for their efforts. Yet, researchers are only beginning to delve into how these institutions join the existing higher education landscape to structure—or impede—educational and economic opportunity.

Unfortunately, existing conventions for longitudinal data collection in higher education make it difficult to investigate this question. Nationally-representative longitudinal studies of college persistence, such as the US Department of Education’s Beginning Postsecondary Study, sample first-time degree-seekers only, excluding the progress of returning students and those enrolling short of a degree. And institutional
accountability statistics track only full-time, first-time degree-seekers within a single institution. Previous research on community college students has thus largely been constrained—both explicitly and implicitly—by negative comparisons to traditional four-year colleges and their students. The traditional college pathway treats education as a singular, sequential stop in the transition to adulthood, while emphasizing the relative disadvantages faced by students whose pathways do not conform to this model. Yet, traditional students are a dwindling proportion of American college-goers—some estimates place them at as little as 25% of American undergraduates—and research must evolve to better understand the experiences and meet the needs of our increasingly diverse student population (Deil-Amen and Deluca 2010; Deil-Amen and Turley 2007). As students move from one institution to the next or college timelines extend beyond six years from their first enrollment in college, students systematically drop out of both nationally-representative and institution-level data collection. To understand how returning students navigate their college options requires data that has previously been unavailable.

The Resilience in Survivors of Katrina (RISK) Project

In this dissertation, I use a unique source of longitudinal, mixed-methods data on low-income parents’ college pathways, the Resilience in Survivors of Katrina (RISK) Project. The RISK Project is a 6.5 year study of low-income parents living in New Orleans at the time of Hurricane Katrina. The RISK Project data are ideally suited for the study of non-traditional students’ higher pathways through college due to the study’s origin in a community college scholarship program for low-income parents (Described in Section III below).
Data collection for the RISK Project began in New Orleans in the fall of 2003. Baseline data were collected as part of the randomized-controlled evaluation of Opening Doors Louisiana, a scholarship and counseling program designed to increase the educational attainment of economically vulnerable students at two Louisiana community colleges\(^2\), Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson. According to Barrow and colleagues (2011:6), “The Opening Doors demonstration was a longitudinal study that aimed to address two problems facing community colleges: 1) high rates of attrition, especially by low-income students; and 2) a dearth of reliable evidence on how to help disadvantaged students persist in community college to achieve long-term academic and labor market success.” At the time of the intervention, the two study institutions enrolled nearly 19,000 students and timely graduation rates were dismally low, hovering around 3% of first-time degree-seeking students.

The Opening Doors intervention began in Fall 2004, one year prior to Hurricane Katrina, with a study population drawn from eligible students enrolling in these focal institutions. In order to be eligible for Opening Doors, subjects had to be 18 to 34 years old; the parent of at least one dependent child; have family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty line; have earned no prior college-level credits; and be willing to attend college at least half-time. As a result of the study’s eligibility requirements, the Opening Doors Louisiana study population was disproportionately female (92.4%), African-American (84.5%) and receiving some form of government assistance (70.9%).

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\(^2\) Opening Doors Louisiana participants who were randomly selected for treatment were offered the opportunity to earn scholarship awards based upon classroom grade performance. Control participants received no additional support from the Opening Doors program. See Barrow et al. (2011) for the one-year outcomes from the randomized controlled trial of this intervention.
The average Opening Doors student was also nearly five years older than typical first-time community college students (mean age of 25.2 for Opening Doors participants versus 20.5 for 2-year public college students nationally). Based on their multi-dimensional disadvantage, these students belong to a population of “highly non-traditional” college students; according to analysis of program data, Opening Doors participants were “generally more likely to possess characteristics that are associated with an increased risk of failing to complete a college degree than the typical community college student in Louisiana or the nation” (Barrow et al 2011:12). In all, 1019 low-income parents intending to enroll between Fall 2004 and Fall 2005 were randomized into the study. See Richburg-Hayes et al. (2009) for further details on Opening Doors study recruitment and design and Chapter 2 for further discussion of the baseline demographic characteristics of the study population.

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina disrupted the community college intervention, briefly shutting the Opening Doors campuses and interrupting students’ college enrollment. However, the existing pre-disaster data on a variety of physical and mental health measures; respondents’ employment and economic resources; household structure; and educational history offered a rare opportunity to study how vulnerable individuals and their families recover in the aftermath of natural disaster. The data also became a unique source of information on an understudied population: potential college returners. To date, RISK has administered two post-hurricane surveys and collected 128 semi-structured life history interviews with a subset of 105 longitudinal survey respondents. 808 individuals (79.3% of baseline Opening Doors study members) participated in at least one post-Katrina follow-up survey, making the RISK study a rich
source of longitudinal, mixed-methods data on how highly disadvantaged students navigate the New Open Door Landscape after the disruption of the hurricane.

II. LOFTY EDUCATIONAL GOALS, PERSISTENT AMBITION

On face, one might expect that an event as catastrophic as Hurricane Katrina would stymie students’ college plans, particularly if they were unlikely to complete a degree in the first place. However, a robust literature in the sociology of education suggests that college aspirations and expectations are surprisingly resilient over time, even for disadvantaged students who face substantial challenges. In this section, I provide a broad overview of research on “unrealistic” college aspirations and their resilience. I highlight the limitations of the current literature for understanding the RISK project’s study population: adult returners in an age of expanding college choices and a cultural paradigm that encourages lifelong learning (Kasworm 2002, 2003).

Aspirations and Reality: Poor Students, Long Odds

Researchers and policy-makers alike note that nearly all American high school students expect to complete a college degree (Goyette 2008; Reynolds et al. 2006; Rosenbaum 2001; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). Empirically measuring the “entrenchment” of this “College for All norm,” Goyette (2008) finds that high school students’ bachelors’ degree expectations climbed steadily since the 1980s, from 43% of high school sophomores in 1980 to 85% in 2002. In the most recent cohort of students, degree expectations are less likely to be based on students’ family background or the educational requirements of their expected occupations than in 1980 (Goyette 2008; Reynolds et al. 2006). The rise of academic and occupational goals has outpaced what
many students are likely to attain based upon measures of their high school achievement or the composition of the labor market, leading some observers to conclude that today’s young people have become too ambitious, “undercutting the long-observed benefits of early educational and occupational plans” (Reynolds et al. 2006:201).

But not all students are equally likely to achieve their lofty aspirations (Alexander et al. 1994; Morgan 2004). In particular, those who begin in two-year colleges are the least likely to earn a timely degree. Despite the long odds of completion that community college students face, Reynolds et al (2006) find that over the last 30 years high school students have increasingly planned to travel the “high risk” community college pathway to their degree and professional aspirations.

Many realities of attending a community college make timely completion a challenge. First, though they are rhetorically positioned as engines of mobility, community colleges operate with comparatively weak institutional resources, whether measured by per-student spending (Bailey et al. 2006; Johnson 2014), straightforward curriculum pathways (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2002) or full-time college personnel (Calcagno et al 2007). Second is students’ poor preparation: because prior academic performance is not considered for open door admission, 61% of students at community colleges take at least one remedial course, and 25% take two or more (US Dept. of Education 2013). Being initially assigned to remedial or “developmental” coursework decreases the likelihood students will earn a degree, and there is little evidence that current practices in these courses help students successfully overcome academic weaknesses (Attewell et al. 2006; Bailey 2009). Finally, the average community college student balances attending school with the demands of complex personal demands
outside of the classroom. This often includes needing to work for pay (Roksa and Velez 2010), family obligations (Bozick 2007), and outside financial responsibilities (Conley 2001). In short, community college students face academic challenges and pursue their goals in under-resourced institutions while being “overburdened [by] the adult responsibilities that many students must manage while in school” (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006:2). While we might imagine institutional structures and supports that better serve such students, colleges—even the relatively approachable community college—often prove difficult to navigate for students who must balance life outside of the classroom with the demands of getting an education.

Non-Selective Colleges: Cooling-out or Opening Doors?

What happens when lofty aspirations meet these challenging realities? In the early 1960s, Burton Clark provided a functionalist account of how the then-emerging community college sector operated to “cool-out” students’ unrealistically high educational aspirations relative to either the willingness of four-year colleges to expand their ranks or space in the economy for college-educated workers (Clark 1960a, 1960b). His argument was that students’ struggles in community colleges offer a series of structured “soft denials” of ambition, ultimately serving to re-channel aspirations towards more realistic outcomes. Until recently, Clark’s work offered the prevailing theoretical model for how the stratified higher education opportunity structure worked to curb disadvantaged students’ outsized “culturally encouraged aspiration” (Clark 1960a:570).

Following Clark, several prominent works detail how the experience of navigating a challenging community college environment could result in frustrated ambition, further explicating the structural position of community colleges in the broader
context of American higher education (Brint and Karabel 1989; Dougherty 1994; Pascarella et al. 1998). The Cooling-out Hypothesis also spawned a cottage industry of empirical work that claimed to test it (Alba and Lavin 1981; Alfonso 2006; Dougherty 1987, 1992; Doyle 2009; Leigh and Gill 2003; Rouse 1995, 1998). This work consistently finds that beginning in community college leads to lower rates of bachelor’s degree attainment. While this enduring relationship is taken as evidence of Cooling-out or “diversion,” such studies generally measure educational *aspiration* during high school only, using degree attainment at a future survey as the measure for leveled aspiration. However, as the data in this dissertation will show, it is possible to both not attain a degree and hope to return in the future. At its core, Clark’s Cooling-out was about the institutionally structured process through which individuals learn to cope with “A major problem of democratic society […] inconsistency between encouragement to achieve and the realities of limited opportunity” (1961:513). While the mismatch between high school aspirations and degree attainment examined in prior longitudinal studies suggests barriers to achievement, these studies do not fully capture either the institutional or social-psychological dimensions of Clark’s Cooling-out.

*Evidence Against Leveled Aspirations*

Indeed, the little empirical work that actually measures how aspirations change over time challenges the Cooling-out Hypothesis. Studies find little evidence that students adjust their goals downward as a result of attending community college, either in response to information about planned occupational requirements or feedback about their academic abilities (Bahr 2008; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum 2002; Reynolds et al. 2006; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen & Person 2006). In their longitudinal study of Baltimore youth,
Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle (2008) find that students’ modal pattern is stable college aspirations at both 4 and 10 years following high school graduation. Among students with changing goals, they find movement in both directions: students are as likely to “warm up,” with higher goals, as they are to “cool out” after some college attendance.

Another prevalent phenomenon that cannot be explained by the Cooling-out Hypothesis is the long and winding pathway that many disadvantaged students travel to a college degree (Deil-Amen and Turley 2007; Giudici and Pallas 2014; Goldrick-Rab 2006). Nearly half of students beginning at a four-year college attend more than one institution within six years, and about 15% attend more than two. Common patterns include upward transfer from associate to baccalaureate programs, backward transfer between four- and two-year institutions, and simultaneous enrollment to facilitate quicker access to required courses (Kalogrides & Grodsky 2011; McCormick 2003). Nationally-representative studies estimate that between 25 and 30 percent of undergraduate students “stop out” at some point, taking some time off from college and returning at a later date (Berkner 2003; Carroll 1989; Park 2013). These data are difficult to square with a theory that predicts that disadvantaged or ill-prepared students’ aspirations are easily frustrated when they face roadblocks on the way to a degree. While the bulk of current work on college pathways focuses on the late teens and early twenties, an emerging pattern of increased persistence beyond normative timeframes means that educational aspiration and attainment are better understood as processes that unfold over time and interact with other aspects of the transition to adulthood (Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle 2008; Giudici and Pallas 2014; Roksa and Velez 2010). By examining how college education
is integrated in the broader life course, we will be better able to understand the decisions faced by the growing population of older students returning to college.

III. UNDERSTANDING PATHWAYS: THE LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

Throughout this study, I use a life course approach to contextualize the winding pathways of students whose college careers stretch beyond the normative timeline and long into adulthood. The central tenant of life course theory is that individuals forge life paths in the context of institutional and historical constraints (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003). This perspective places primacy on understanding how social institutions, such as the educational system, the labor market, and the family pattern one’s life chances over time. After a period of discovery in the 1980s and 1990s, the life course perspective is undergoing a renaissance, as recent studies document that the once well-ordered transition to adulthood—finishing school, leaving home, financial independence, getting married, having children—substantially differs for today’s young people compared to the lives of their parents (Brinton 2010; Berlin, Furstenburg, and Waters 2010; Waters et al. 2011). Researchers have documented that these pathways have long been disorderly and winding for low-income African Americans, such as the women in this study, whose institutionalized disadvantage has placed the orderly progression of traditional adulthood beyond the reach of many (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Hardaway and Mcloyd 2009). But against a contemporary backdrop of economic uncertainty, steps on the pathway to adulthood are “substantially delayed, overlapping, and increasingly reversible” across classes within the United States (Silva 2012) and also internationally (Brinton 2010; Newman 2012).
Despite the unraveling of the traditional transition to adulthood, the bulk of existing research on college persistence continues to treat college-going as a singular, sequential event, failing to account for the complexity of many students’ lives outside the classroom (Del-Amen and Turley 2007). While growing empirical evidence suggests the lengthening of college careers, particularly for disadvantaged students (Deil-Amen and Turley 2007; Guidici and Pallas 2014; Goldrick-Rab 2006), sociologists are only now beginning to turn attention to the way that college-going continues to shape the life course for young people beyond their late teens and early twenties. This dissertation contributes to this emerging literature.

The current historical moment in the history of higher education also points to the importance of a contextualized understanding of non-traditional students’ college careers. While community colleges have long been seen as institutions of second chances (Dougherty 1994; Kalogrides and Grodsky 2011), students with pressing work and familial responsibilities increasingly seek perceived opportunities at for-profit online institutions and technical certification programs (Hentschke and Tierney 2007). As outlined in Section I above, these rapidly-expanding programs educate a growing proportion of American undergraduates (from 2% in 1980 to 10% in 2002), offering new opportunities to return to school despite previous failed attempts to complete. While this New Open Door Landscape is only beginning to receive scholarly attention, I argue it has powerful consequences for students’ chances for timely completion and economic stability, and force a reconsideration of the Cooling-out Hypothesis in light of the changing institutional landscape.
Drawing from Elder and Geile’s (2009:8) insight that “transitions are part of a life trajectory that gives them meaning,” I argue that the tenuous, overlapping, and reversible milestones that mark transition to adulthood imbue the return to college with a compelling narrative power, while the expansion of the open door landscape offers many more options for return. According to Elder and Geile (2009), transitions are best understood as a sequence of socially-defined events and roles that an individual enacts over time. The College for All movement, the rise of the paradigm of life-long learning, and the expansion of educational options targeted at busy working adults mean that now, more than ever, higher education offers a template for students to narrate and structure their lives beyond teenaged ambition and long into adulthood.

In the next sections of this chapter, I group relevant literature by Elder’s (1992, 1998) “pillars of life course analysis.” I interweave previous research and a description of the study population to argue that respondents’ historical and geographic context, variations in timing of social roles, and individual agency set the stage for my discussion of the form and meaning of these economically vulnerable young mothers’ college persistence.

**Historical and Geographical Context**

In addition to the general expansion of open-door college options discussed at the opening of this chapter, I consider two other relevant contextual features for this study: how the Opening Doors intervention fits into the broader context of declining social supports for disadvantaged populations, and the particular context of New Orleans before and after Katrina.
“Opening Doors” for low-income parents in community college

While the for-profit higher education sector expanded throughout the 2000s to include flexible courses and distance learning for returning students, efforts to improve the educational outcomes of non-traditional students in community colleges also grew. The Opening Doors study originates in that context. In 2003, Manpower Development Research Corporation (MDRC), a large non-profit public policy research firm, together with the MacArthur Network on the Transition to Adulthood, launched the Opening Doors Demonstration project, gathering baseline data for what would become The RISK Project (data collection for the study is described in depth in Chapter 2). Opening Doors was the first large-scale random assignment study to be conducted in a community college setting. This national, multisite demonstration was aimed at scientifically testing promising strategies to improve college outcomes for low-income students. Opening Doors conducted studies in six community colleges in four states, including two in New Orleans—Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College-West Jefferson (LTC). In the two participating New Orleans community colleges, researchers and college staff implemented a performance-based scholarship program to test whether providing financial incentives for passing grades would increase student persistence and credit completion (Scrivener and Coghlan 2011).

The Opening Doors program was developed in the shadow of what President Bill Clinton dubbed “the end of welfare as we know it.” While the College for All norm gained traction in the minds of American high schoolers from the 1980s onward (Goyette 2008; Rosenbaum 2001), sweeping changes in the social safety net added further urgency to low-income students’ pursuit of a college degree. In the mid-1990s, welfare reform
prompted heated public debates over the best way to move Americans in poverty—primarily mothers of dependent children—off of public assistance and into self-sufficiency. This discussion built upon a long history of morally-charged political rhetoric defining the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor (Katz 2013). In the public debate of the 1990s, Katz (2013) argues that poverty came to be defined as “a problem of people”—in particular, of weak and dependent poor people who needed to be incentivized to take economic responsibility for themselves and their families.

The College for All movement—and the Opening Doors demonstration—espoused a logic of human capital investment, offering one potential pathway for “taking responsibility:” short-term investment in education that promises to bear future economic fruits. Welfare reform, however, embodied a “work-first ideology” that in practice prioritized pushing the poor off of public assistance and into the low-wage labor market (Shaw et al. 2009; Shaw and Rab 2003). As Shaw and her colleagues describe in detail, work-first ideology organized action at the agency, state, and local levels, ultimately reducing support for low-income adults’ access to quality higher education by prioritizing narrow, short-term technical training. Despite a broader cultural discourse about the importance of investing in education, the work-first ideology of welfare reform made it plain: “college is only for some, not all, in the United States” (Shaw et al. 2009:17). Following welfare reform, the young parents in this study navigate these conflicting cultural messages and policy contexts as they search for economic stability and upward mobility.

Under welfare reform, states were given powerful incentives to reduce the number of their residents receiving cash assistance through Temporary Assistance to Needy
Families (TANF). If states had leftover money in their federal allocation after reducing their welfare rolls, they were allowed to use this money to develop and evaluate experimental programs aiming to efficiently and effectively serve economically vulnerable populations. In Louisiana, the Opening Doors scholarships were funded by this state TANF overflow funding, making the program a direct outgrowth of changes in the social safety net. Richburg-Hays and colleagues (2009:16) describe how welfare reform shaped the study population as follows:

“Because program funding came through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, the state was particularly concerned about targeting adults who might either be receiving public assistance or be at risk of needing such assistance in the future. […] The state required interested students to provide documentation that was similar to the required documentation for a welfare grant application. For example, students had to provide copies of their children’s birth certificates; show proof of income, including child support payments, if applicable; and provide proof of a high school diploma, GED certificate, or entrance test scores from the college’s assessment office. Although it was not a condition for participation in the study, the staff who handled intake also tried to make sure that all applicants had completed a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The eligibility criteria for Opening Doors virtually ensured that everyone in the sample qualified for a federal Pell Grant, which would cover tuition and fees.”

This experiment took place in the context of many other experimental pilot programs leading up to and as a result of welfare reform, beginning in the early 1990s and continuing still today (Rogers-Dillon 2004).

The Opening Doors scholarship offered students up to $1000 for one semester or $2000 for two semesters if all performance targets were met. If participating students enrolled at least half-time and earned at least a C average (2.0), they could receive up to three payments each semester. Notably, the scholarships were over and above federal Pell Grants and other financial aid that the students may already have received. The money could be spent however students pleased: it was not limited to expenses that were
directly education-related. Thus the program aimed to help address students’ financial needs while incentivizing their academic performance. Students in the program group also interacted more regularly with program counselors, who regularly assessed students’ academic progress and awarded the scholarships to those who were eligible. Students who were randomized in the study’s control group did not receive the opportunity for additional funding or counseling, but they had access to standard financial aid and the colleges’ standard counseling services (Barrow et al. 2011; Scrivener and Coghlan 2011).

Initial evidence documented that students in the intervention group enrolled at higher rates in the second semester of program participation and earned 3.3 credit hours more in the first year of the study (approximately 45% more credits compared to the control group), suggesting “some evidence of increased performance and effort” (Barrow et al. 2011:2). While Hurricane Katrina’s closing of the study institutions meant that MDRC was unable to study the long-term impacts of Opening Doors Louisiana on students’ college-going, the RISK Project continued to collect survey and interview data from students for three additional years post-Katrina. The dispersion of students across the United States means that many students who returned to school did not return to their Opening Doors institution, offering a unique opportunity to understand their educational decision-making within the rapidly diversifying landscape of higher education, and within the context of particularly unsettled lives.

New Orleans for RISK respondents, before, during and after Katrina

The popular impression of pre-Katrina New Orleans was of “The Big Easy,” a raucous city full of life and celebration. At the same time, New Orleans was, in many ways, a tough place to live for the RISK Project respondents even before the hurricane.
In the early 2000s, the educational and economic outlook in New Orleans was not particularly bright. The Orleans Parish public school district ranked 67th out of 68 districts in Louisiana (Dreilinger 2014), and the state of Louisiana ranked among the bottom five states in performance on the 2004 National Assessment of Educational Progress (LeFevre 2006). For students enrolling in the local community colleges, the likelihood of graduation was low: in the two Opening Doors study institutions, on-time graduation rates hovered around 3% (Brock and Richburg-Hays 2006). In 2005, 24.5% of New Orleans residents lived below the poverty level, compared to 13.3% in the United States as a whole (Fussell 2007). And for young adults like those in The RISK Project, the local economy primarily consisted of low-paying work in the service sector and tourism industry (Dolfman, Wasser, and Bergman 2007). While many interviewees wistfully recalled the close-knit, multigenerational neighborhoods and communities in which they lived (Rosen 2012), study participants’ daily lives in pre-Katrina New Orleans were marked by significant struggles associated with poverty and other structural disadvantages.

Table 1.1 reports survey data on respondents’ personal economic circumstances as they entered the study. At the time of Opening Doors enrollment, about two years before Katrina, 50% of the respondents were employed, earning an average of $6.97 an hour. About one-fifth depended on their parents for more than half of their financial needs. And more than 70% received some kind of public benefit, the most common of which was food stamps (63% of study participants). Nearly 20% of respondents lived in public housing when they entered the study.
When the levees protecting New Orleans failed in late August 2005, about 80% of the city was flooded, damaging property, infrastructure, economic activity, and taking nearly 1,200 lives in Louisiana. All told, 41% of the state of Louisiana’s population was affected by the hurricane’s flooding and structural damage, and about 1.7 million people were displaced throughout the Gulf Coast region, making Hurricane Katrina the largest internal migration in the US since the “dust bowl” migrations of the 1930s (Falk, Hunt, and Hunt 2006; Picou and Marshall, 2007). The hurricane was not unbiased in its damage: Black residents and those with lower incomes were significantly more likely to experience higher levels of hurricane exposure, including greater flooding and housing damage than whites and those with higher incomes (e.g. Elliot and Pais, 2006; Fussell, Sastry, and VanLandingham 2010). Black New Orleanians were also much less likely than Whites to return to the city in the year after Katrina, largely due to the disproportionate flood damage occurring in Black neighborhoods (Paxson and Rouse

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Table 1.1. Baseline Economic Indicators for RISK Project Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RISK 2-year Post Katrina Respondents</td>
<td>752</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Baseline Economic Indicators**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Hourly Wage for those employed (SD)</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depended on Parents for &gt;50% of Financial Need</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Public Benefits Receipt**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability (SSI)</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash assistance</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food stamps</td>
<td>477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public housing</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above benefits</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: RISK Project Baseline Survey, limited to 2-year post-Katrina respondents

Note: Percentages calculated from item respondents; item non-response varied but was not greater than 3%
2008; Sastry and Gregory 2013). Over-all, hurricane-related displacement was long-lasting: by 2008, about a third of pre-Hurricane New Orleans residents had still not returned to the city.

Sitting at the confluence of these risk factors, the majority of RISK Project participants lived in areas that were deeply affected by the hurricane. These included high concentrations of respondents in the most poverty-stricken neighborhoods in the city, such as the Lower 9th Ward. According to Graif’s (2014) analysis of RISK data, before Katrina, the average participant lived in a neighborhood that was 70% non-White, with a median family income of $33,694. The average RISK participant lived in a neighborhood with 26% of residents in poverty; according to the US Census Bureau, neighborhoods exceeding 20% poverty are designated official “poverty areas” (Bishaw 2012).

Table 1.2 reports survey data on respondents’ hurricane experience and residential location at the 2-year post-Katrina survey. Nearly all respondents (97.3%) evacuated for at least one night due to the hurricane, and 83% of those left before the hurricane struck. By linking respondents’ residential locations to geographic data about flood depth, RISK Project researchers found that the average flood depth in respondents’ neighborhoods was over 1.5 feet (Graif 2014). Other research from the RISK Project reports that neighborhood flood depth was associated with continued displacement 18 months after the hurricane, with those who owned homes or lived with extended family members prior to Katrina the least likely to have returned (Paxson and Rouse 2008).

RISK Project respondents experienced a host of hurricane-related traumas in the week following the hurricane. In all, 90% of respondents experienced at least one
hurricane-related trauma, and 43% experienced three or more. A substantial proportion of them lacked enough food to eat (40%) and about one-third lacked fresh water or felt their

Table 1.2. Hurricane Experiences and Post-Katrina Residential Location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>RISK 2-year Post Katrina Respondents</strong></td>
<td>752  100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hurricane Experience</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evacuated for at least one night due to Katrina</td>
<td>724  97.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before the hurricane</td>
<td>601  83.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During the hurricane</td>
<td>38   5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After the hurricane</td>
<td>85   11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Water Depth in Neighborhood, Sept 2 2005 (feet)</td>
<td>704  1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(SD)</td>
<td>(.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>In the Week After Katrina</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacked enough food to eat</td>
<td>299  40.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt life was in danger</td>
<td>253  34.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacked enough fresh water</td>
<td>236  31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacked necessary medication</td>
<td>209  28.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacked necessary medical care</td>
<td>187  25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacked knowledge of children's safety</td>
<td>158  21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacked knowledge of other family members' safety</td>
<td>580  78.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experienced at least one trauma</strong></td>
<td>659  89.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experienced three or more traumas</strong></td>
<td>317  43.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hurricane-related Damage and Loss</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home flooded</td>
<td>454  61.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost personal property</td>
<td>673  90.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home was robbed/looted</td>
<td>210  29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death/loss of friend or family member</td>
<td>250  33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death/loss of family pet</td>
<td>126  16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Residential Location 2 years Post-Katrina</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans MSA</td>
<td>458  61.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same home as Pre-Katrina</td>
<td>142  18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same neighborhood as Pre-Katrina, different home</td>
<td>55   7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>118  15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-New Orleans Lousiana</td>
<td>77   10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsewhere</td>
<td>90  12.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: RISK Project 2-year Post-Katrina Survey

Note: Percentages calculated from item respondents; item non-response varied but was not greater than 3%
life was in danger in the days following Katrina. Smaller, but still substantial proportions lacked necessary medicine or medical care, as well. And nearly all survey respondents (80%) lacked information about the safety of a family member; 20% did not know whether their children were safe. Other research by the RISK team reports that worries about their children’s safety was a significant source of post-disaster psychological stress for respondents and that the interview respondents consistently placed their children’s needs above their own in the aftermath of the hurricane (Lowe, Chan, and Rhodes 2011).

In terms of hurricane-related damage and loss, nearly all respondents (90%) reported that they lost personal property as a result of the hurricane. Over half lived in homes that were flooded; 30% experienced robbery or looting of their homes. Notably, one-third reported the death or loss of a friend or family member due to the hurricane and many also lost family pets. Together, these traumas and losses were associated with post-traumatic stress, psychological distress, and other significant health problems in the RISK Population two years later (Lowe et al. 2009; Paxson et al. 2011; Rhodes et al. 2010).

Following the hurricane, respondents were dispersed throughout the United States (Graif 2014). At the two-year Post-Katrina RISK survey, about 60% of respondents had returned to the New Orleans metro area. Due to the widespread damage in the city, even within New Orleans, displacement was the norm: only one in five returned to their pre-Katrina homes, while 8% returned to different homes in their pre-Katrina neighborhood. At the two-year follow-up survey, fifteen percent of respondents lived in Texas, 10% lived outside of the New Orleans MSA but in Louisiana, and 12% lived in one of 23 other states.
The destruction in New Orleans and displacement of its deep-rooted communities posed more than just logistical challenges for the young parents in this study. Recent theorizing in sociology suggests the importance of “place” in grounding identity, “embodying and securing otherwise intangible cultural norms, identities and memories” (Gieryn 2000:473). If this is true, then “displacement” is not just about physical dislocation, but also about the uprooting of taken-for-granted understandings of the self (Falk 2003, 2004). In New Orleans, where families and communities were often in place for generations (Falk, Hunt, and Hunt 2006), displacement prompted, for many respondents, a reconsidering of not only one’s life plan, but one’s very understanding of themselves and their place in the world.

**Variations in Timing and Social Roles**

A second major tenet of the life course perspective is the proposition that the temporal order of life milestones shapes their impact. This is Elder’s “principle of timing in lives,” which states “the developmental impact of a succession of life transitions or events is contingent on when they occur in a person’s life” (1998: 3). Indeed, prior research in college persistence suggests that life changes—beyond only career concerns—influence adult learners’ educational decision-making. Aslanian and Brickell (1980) find that 85% of adult students report enrolling in school in order to cope with career, family, health, religious, or citizenship changes. While these catalysts may bring students to enroll, the vast majority of adult students report improved career prospects as the primary end goal (Aslanian 2001; Kasworm 2002, 2003). However, most of the current research on the expectations and experiences of older college students originates from an applied perspective, seeking to understand the demographic characteristics of
adult learners for program planning. Focused on practical concerns, the adult education literature largely leaves aside considerations of the broader institutional context or the cultural logics at play in how students understand the meaning and value of a degree or decide upon a course of action.

As Opening Doors was targeted to economically vulnerable young parents with dependent children, the RISK study population is relatively homogenous in terms of background demographics. However, even within this constraint, there is still substantial variation in the order and timing of several of the traditional milestones of adulthood: establishing residential independence, romantic partnering, and employment stability, in particular. By examining how RISK respondents’ discussions of their college goals varies based upon their achievement of the normative milestones of adulthood, I document how the meaning and value of a college degree is constructed in the context of broader life events. This approach highlights the culturally-constructed meaning of education, rather than limiting the discussion to education’s instrumental value, otherwise the overwhelming focus of prior research on disadvantaged student populations.

*Individual Agency: Education and Constructing a Narrative*

A major analytic goal of early research in the life course perspective was to demonstrate that what may appear as individualized pathways are actually socially patterned and historically constrained. As Elder points out in his intellectual history of life course research, “Some individuals are able to select the paths they follow, a phenomenon known as human agency, but these choices are not made in a social vacuum. All life choices are contingent on the opportunities and constraints of social structure and culture” (1998:2). While the previous sections outline the structural constraints and
opportunities facing RISK respondents as they navigate their menu of educational options in the context of their trajectories, what of the role of culture—and through it, agency?

With the dissolution of the orderly transition to adulthood characteristic of the early 21st century, recently scholarly attention has focused on how young people themselves understand the changing meaning and experiences of adulthood (Benson and Furstenberg 2007; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Shanahan, Profeli, and Mortimer 2005; Waters et al. 2011). Offering a promising theoretical direction, Silva (2012, 2013) blends this research with insights from the sociology of the self to discuss the origins and practical limitations of these emerging cultural narratives. Her research draws heavily upon Giddens’ work on the “reflexive project of the self” (Giddens 1991). Giddens argues that when the orderly achievement of life milestones cannot be taken for granted, individuals are forced to actively shape their own biographies of progress. These narratives are “routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual” (Giddens 1991: 3). Yet, the narrative tools one chooses are not wholly flexible: people draw their options from a set of culturally-available stories to make sense of their current position and future options (Ewick and Silbey 1995). Silva’s research with working-class young adults confirms these points, while arguing that, without the material resources required to propel their narratives into the future, many of the young people she studies are “lost in transition” (Brinton 2010) between an understanding of self and making their aspirations a reality.

Applying these insights to make sense of my study participants’ educational plans, I argue that continued educational aspiration and a return to college offers respondents both narrative structure and practical possibilities for future stability. While
a return to school allows students to anticipate forward momentum, in the broader context of declining social supports for economically vulnerable families, educational grants and student loans are relatively accessible resources that support individual action. This is the upside of expanding college access. However, in contrast to previous studies that assume that all college persistence is positive, not all of the educational options that respondents pursue offer equal opportunities for success. As such, continued persistence also has the possibility of leaving some respondents worse off, accruing practically useless credentials and accruing burdensome student debt.

IV. CHAPTER OUTLINE

This study uses longitudinal, mixed-methods data from the RISK Project to examine low-income young parents’ postsecondary pathways. I ask and answer the following research questions:

- **How do students navigate the increasingly diverse set of educational options available to them?** What does a college career actually look like for the most disadvantaged students today?

- **How does this group of economically vulnerable, largely African-American mothers make “the case for college?”** What cultural logics do they draw upon to understand the meaning and value of a college degree and their pathways through school?

- **What do students’ experiences and understandings reveal about the role of higher education in the elongated transition to adulthood?** What are the limitations of college-return as an organizing narrative and practical strategy?

In Chapter 2, I describe the RISK Project’s data and its unique strengths for understanding the college pathways of an understudied population at an important historical moment. This chapter also proposes a method for the type of systematic
qualitative coding required to effectively combine survey and interview data and take full advantage of the features of qualitative data analysis (QDA) software. I argue that the process I developed over the course of this study could help improve the transparency of interview-based studies and facilitate the integration of multiple data sources on a single respondent.

I then move on to the three empirical chapters, examining the study’s research questions in turn. In Chapter 3, I use nationally-representative longitudinal data to describe the persistence of non-traditional students beginning in community college. I then compare these national data to survey-based measures of persistence from the RISK Project, finding comparatively high persistence over time among RISK respondents. Qualitative educational histories from interviews reveal two conceptually distinct persistence pathways among the respondents. Notably, these pathways would be difficult or impossible to capture using current nationally-representative or institutional accountability data, underlining the limitations to our current measures of college careers.

In Chapter 4, I use interview data to understand respondents’ continued high degree aspiration despite the significant struggles they have faced in achieving them. I find that economic imperative and the moral valence of college-going combine to support continued degree aspirations and enrollment over long periods of time.

In Chapter 5, I show how these two educational logics—instrumental and expressive—are associated with variation among respondents in their progress towards the traditional markers of adulthood. Respondents who have faced the most challenges in meeting and sustaining these milestones—residential independence, romantic partnerships, and employment stability—lean most heavily on the expressive power of
education to organize their personal narratives. In contrast, respondents who have had more straightforward pathways evince cost-benefit (though often poorly-informed) calculations about the economic returns to a degree.

I conclude in Chapter 6 by discussing the implications of these findings for future studies of college careers and the American educational opportunity structure more broadly. As Drew Faust explained, and study respondents confirm, a college education is not only about economic returns. It is also about the type of person we want to be. However, the symbolic and practical implications of expressive education vary depending on who is attending, their resources, and the type of institutions they are able to attend. As college careers stretch beyond early adulthood and unfold within the context of complicated lives, attending to this nuance allows us to better understand the broader structure of opportunity in America today.
CHAPTER 2
DATA AND METHODS

The data in this dissertation are drawn from two rounds of qualitative life history interviews and four rounds of longitudinal survey data collected over a 6.5 year period from participants in the Resilience in the Survivors of Katrina (RISK) Project. The RISK Project’s post-Katrina follow-ups were designed to enable cutting-edge mixed-method data analysis; the study design incorporates multiple points of interaction between survey and qualitative data (Creswell and Plano Clark 2010). Interview targets were selected to vary on survey measures of mental health\(^3\) (Lowe and Rhodes 2013) and balance respondents’ residential location one year post-Katrina (New Orleans or Houston/Dallas, TX). Insights gained from Round 1 interviews were used to guide the design of the second post-Katrina data collection. Similar life course concepts were measured in both survey and interview protocols, offering an opportunity for convergent analysis and methodological triangulation (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). See Figure 2.1 for a visual representation of the RISK Project data collection design and timing.

\(^{3}\) A small subset of second-round interviewees was selected to investigate survey-based measures of mental health trajectory. With the exception of one respondent, who appeared to be very ill and was excluded from my analysis, these participants’ responses to education question did not systematically vary from the full interview population.
Figure 2.1. RISK Project Data Design, Availability, and Timing

- **Pre-Test**
  - Nov-03
  - Opening Doors Randomization/Baseline Survey
    - N=1019
  - Dec-04
  - Opening Doors 12-month Survey
    - N=492
    - Sep-05

- **Post-Test**
  - Jan-06
  - Hurricane Katrina August 29, 2005
  - Mean time since baseline: 25 months
    - Katrina: 10.8 months
  - Mar-06
    - RISK Post-Katrina 1
    - 1 Year Non-Responder
      - N=309
    - 1 Year Responder
      - N=402
  - Mar-07
  - Jan-06
  - Interview 1
    - N=57
  - Jan-05
  - Interview 2
    - N=49
  - Apr-09
  - Mean time since baseline: 63 months
    - Katrina: 46 months
  - Mar-09
    - RISK Post-Katrina 2
    - All Baseline Respondents
      - N=752
  - Apr-10

- **Survey**

- **Interview**

**TIMELINE**

Nov-03
Jan-04
Jan-05
Jan-06
Jan-07
Jan-08
Jan-09
Jan-10
Apr-10
I report RISK baseline and 60-month survey data and the information from the subset of 105 qualitative interviews. Table 2.1 reports descriptive statistics for the full baseline sample, respondents to the 60-month survey, and the interview subsample. Due to the eligibility criteria for Opening Doors, the baseline population is largely female (92%), Black (85%), and not living with a partner (85%) at the time they enrolled in Opening Doors. The majority of respondents (73%) also received at least one government benefit at the beginning of the study; the most common of these is food stamps (62% of the sample). Half were employed when they enrolled in Opening Doors; the most recent average hourly wage was $7.08. According to analysis by Richburg-Hayes and colleagues (2009), the baseline Opening Doors sample was more likely to be female and black than the full cohort of first-time, first-year students at the study institutions, though they were similar in age. The comparison also shows that the Opening Doors sample was more likely to be receiving financial aid.

Nearly 74% of baseline respondents completed the 60-month survey, 2 years post-Katrina. As indicated by Table 2.1, this group’s baseline demographic characteristics are not statistically significantly different from the full Opening Doors population. The 105 interviewees are also demographically similar to the full Opening Doors population, with the exception of all interviewees being female, which was by design.
The RISK Project data offer several advantages for the present study of aspirations and educational decision-making through young adulthood, and particularly for students who are past traditional college-age. First, the initial requirement that Opening Doors participants be low-income parents means that the pressures of family
and the labor market are actively at play in the lives of the women in the study. Second, typical longitudinal studies of college persistence are limited to full-time, first-time college students, who are relatively advantaged compared to the RISK Project participants. Indeed, the majority of women in the Opening Doors population does not meet these criteria, and would normally be overlooked in studies of college persistence. Third, unlike most studies of college careers, respondent follow-up was not contingent on continued enrollment in a single institution. Through narrative educational histories, I catalog students’ engagement in the full range of American sub-baccalaureate educational institutions, a landscape that rapidly changed over the data collection period of 2003 to 2010. Fourth, Hurricane Katrina provided an exogenous shock in college attendance, closing both school sites. This meant that the decision-making process about whether and how to return to school was salient for interview respondents, whether or not they were enrolled at the time of the hurricane. Fifth, the five-year time horizon is unusually long for a qualitative study of community college students. Finally, the rigorous mixed-method design of the RISK Project offers novel opportunities to describe general trends in persistence and also develop a rich account of mechanisms at play beyond those available in previous studies of community college students.

Hurricane Katrina represents both a strength and a challenge in my analysis. In terms of the latter, Katrina was undoubtedly a definitive setback for some students’ college careers and may have induced some of the “Start, Start Again” enrollment behavior that I document. At the same time, much of the evidence points toward how unlikely timely completion was for this group of students, even without the hurricane. First, only 3% of first-time degree-seekers graduated Delgado within 150% time prior to
Katrina. Second, for many students, the hurricane was just one more in a long line of educational interruptions and challenges. In Chapter 3, I use qualitative life history data to discuss respondents’ full college pathways, including many students’ numerous enrollment spells prior to their involvement in Opening Doors. In this context, Hurricane Katrina is best understood as offering a unique, real-time study of potential returners’ persistent expectations and decision-making processes. While it limits the generalizability of completion rates and other statistics, the analytic leverage offered by Katrina is a unique strength of this study.

DATA PREPARATION AND SYSTEMATIC DATA ANALYSIS

In addition to being of substantive importance for the study of disadvantaged adults’ educational careers, the RISK Project data offer a unique opportunity for methodological innovation. The nested data collection facilitates an integrated person-centered analysis, combining data from longitudinal survey responses and in-depth interviews within a single respondent. Capitalizing on this study design, my goal was to combine the two types of data to develop a rich explanatory account of how low-income mothers’ understanding of the value of education and educational decision-making are embedded in their broader experience of the transition to adulthood. While I briefly describe the specific analytic techniques used in each chapter as needed, this section discusses practical issues of preparing data for and implementing integrated analysis.

Systematic Qualitative Coding

While large-scale interview projects have an increasing presence in sociology, there has been “no parallel proliferation of studies in the actual process of doing
qualitative research” (Huberman and Miles 2002:x, cited in Silbey 2009: 79). As we set out to analyze a large pile of transcripts, there is the vague promise that ideas—the conceptual relationships of analysis—will magically “emerge” as we read. Yet researchers facing over 1,000 of pages of qualitative interview transcripts have little guidance on an analytic procedure to focus their energy or agreed-upon language to communicate their process to the reader.

This is particularly true when it comes to the implementation of qualitative software, which is gaining in popularity in sociological publications, but not necessarily facilitating procedural transparency. While usage of QDA software increased by 35% over the 2000s, closer examination reveals that the majority of articles published in 38 social science journals used only basic features that mimicked analytic procedures one would use with post-it notes on paper printouts (White, Judd, and Poliandri 2012). Clearly, there is room to more fully utilize the capabilities of this technology as we analyze our data. The issue is one of how.

QDA software promises to help the researcher organize analysis to generate new insights about qualitative data. Still, rigor remains a property of analysts, not of software. QDA software is not a substitute for spending time with the data. Instead, thoughtful use of software means easy data storage, retrieval, and reduction, allowing the researcher to build arguments that are solidly based in the data. See Appendix A for a discussion of choosing the appropriate Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) software for this project.

Here, I outline my procedure for marshaling the features of QDA software to aid the development, validation and refinement of data-based explanations in in-depth interview research. The goal of my approach was to fully take advantage of the value
added by QDA technology. Grounded theorists’ “open coding” was a process
circumscribed by the technology of the craft at the time—paper printouts, scissors and
post-it notes. Today, QDA technology affords an opportunity to revisit the craft of
organizing coding, opening new analytic possibilities. I arrived at the analytic approach
in this dissertation through an iterative process of trial, error, and revision, supported by
Mary Waters’ advising. It is our hope that this work will advance the conversation about
procedural transparency in qualitative analysis; our approach and technique are further
explicated in Deterding and Waters (2015), but was developed during our work with the
RISK Project and mine in this dissertation.

Using QDA software to structure analysis and data-based explanation

I approached the RISK Project’s 130 life history interviews with the following goals:

- Organize documents by respondent: transcripts, memos, fieldnotes, etc
- Index text for quick retrieval
- Focus the application of analytic categories to increase the reliability of thematic
coding
- Enable straightforward assessment of the construct validity and reliability of
thematic codes
- Enable easy examination of the relationships between respondent-level attributes
and analytic/conceptual categories to document the prevalence of posited
relationships and rule out alternative explanations
- Identify negative cases for the purpose of theory refinement
Tenets of the research approach

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to delve too deeply into ongoing conflicts about the epistemological limits of interview research (See Sociological Methods and Research Forum 2014, Jerolmack & Khan and responses) or debates over the definition of “rigor” in the design of qualitative data collection (Becker 2010; Lamont and White 2009; Ragin, Nagel and White 2009). Yet, I did aim for a goal of “systematic qualitative research,” actively communicating the logical steps in my data analysis. How did I generate and operationalize my concepts? How did I build and document conceptual relationships, including attempts to identify alternative explanations and explain negative cases? QDA software was a valuable asset in this process.

Once data were collected and transcribed, a process of data indexing and memo-writing was aimed at getting to know the data and identifying concepts and the proposed relationships between them. After this exploratory work, I implemented an analytic process that allowed for the possibility that my initial assumptions and interpretations would turn out to be incorrect. That is, over the course of analysis, I espoused what Wendy Griswold dubs a “form of provisional, provincial positivism, ie ‘If I’m right about the story, we should see X and if we do not find X, I’m probably not right’” (Griswold 2009:153). Aside from experimental study designs, the closest that most qualitative sociological research comes to the standard of “falsifiable” is a systematic search for negative evidence—what are alternative explanations, why are they implausible, and what can negative cases do for our explanation (Nagel 2009: 163). With large-scale interview studies, a strong qualitative argument grounded in the data can cover these bases.
My work in this dissertation demonstrates how QDA software, thoughtfully implemented, can assist a researcher as she develops data-based theories. The software’s primary strengths are in organizing the data, facilitating reliable analytic coding, and helping the researcher document and refine her explanations through testing of alternatives and identifying negative cases to explore. These particular strengths of QDA software critically depend upon reliable coding for systematic construction of an argument.

Preparing the documents

My process of data organization began with preparation of the data files themselves. The following steps ensured that the data were well-organized and easily searchable.

- Uniform naming conventions of files. If transcript documents are named with respondent ID numbers, all three software programs will import the document name as an anchor to which you can attach respondent-level characteristics. This automation saved a lot of time in matching transcripts to survey data.

- Use of respondent ID in transcription. This step ensured easy identification of excerpted text during data analysis

- Interviewer initials in transcription. Given that the RISK Project had multiple interviewers, use of initials in transcription aided in identification of the data.

Logical progression of QDA

Becker (2004:45) acknowledges “The big difficulty in making [qualitative] analyses at the end has always been the trouble of manipulating large amounts of uncategorized (and difficult to categorize, because gathering wasn’t constrained by
considerations of that kind of categorization) data.” Yet, he goes on to say that he thinks this part of the question has been “pretty well handled.” If the lack of transparency in qualitative research articles is any indication, that is far from true.

As suggested by the NSF systematic qualitative research panel on Sociology, it is important to make a distinction between “having a clear analytic procedure (method for categorization) and the subsequent process of data interpretation” (NSF Sociology executive report 2009: 142). For clear and systematic coding, I defined analysis as a three-step process: (1) data indexing, attribute coding, and conceptual development (exploration and provisional theorizing); (2) selective retrieval and application of analytic codes; and (3) validation, theory testing and refinement.

The first read of the transcripts played an important role in generating analytic concepts and theories—identifying the “stories” and conceptual relationships in the RISK data. I had some *a priori* idea of trends across the interviews or themes (derived from the literature and my fieldnotes), but at the beginning of the coding, these were not refined enough to apply analytic codes to a large number of interviews with any degree of reliability. Thus, on the first read, I worked with other graduate student coders (Asad Asad and Jessica Tollette) to apply a “topical index” to large chunks of text in order to facilitate data reduction and retrieval for the analytic process. Setting the data up in this way allowed subsequent reads to be more focused and analytic/conceptual coding more reliable. It also prepared the data for distribution to the research team.

*Round one: indexing, attribute coding, and conceptual development*

This round of coding represented the initial data preparation and theory generation. It followed four general steps:
1. Topic indexing

In order to prepare the data for analysis, on the first read we applied a topical index to the data so that it was easy to retrieve content for analytic coding. This process was similar to producing the index at the back of a book, allowing me to turn to the necessary pages of data in the future. Our topical index followed the questions in the interview protocol, but this task is not as straightforward as it may seem, given that most interviews are semi-structured; interviewers did not re-ask questions that were answered in the natural course of the conversation. After an initial pass through each transcript, we used a code-by-document matrix to ensure that all topics were covered in the course of an interview. Where it appeared that a respondent did not answer a question in the protocol, we re-read the transcript make the answer wasn’t overlooked as it was naturally intertwined in the conversation. If the interviews were very unstructured, large codes such as “childhood,” “romantic relationships,” and “educational history” may have been more appropriate than coding by question. Note that these are purely descriptive codes, not analytical (conceptual) ones.

2. Identifying respondent attributes

Most arguments using qualitative data either explicitly or implicitly relate conceptual categories that emerge in the data to respondent-level attributes such as race, gender, or marital status. To establish these links, establishing respondent attributes is an important part of data preparation. We generated basic demographic attributes of each respondent such as “location at interview,” “employment status,” “marital status,” and “educational attainment” from the
interview to establish relationships later in the analytic process. For each of the 130 interviews, these attributes were recorded in a spreadsheet at the time of topical indexing.

3. Identifying great quotes and “aha” moments.

On this first read, we also strived to identify chunks of text where respondents were particularly concise, fluid, or poignant. We also included a separate code for snippets that triggered “aha” moments in our understanding of the data, so that we could find these again later. In subsequent analysis, we could then query the overlap of “great quote” or “aha” with analytic codes to identify quotes to include in the paper.

4. Respondent and cross-case analytic memos

As suggested by Small (2009:169), I conceptualized the qualitative interviews as a series of case studies. As I read each case during the index round, I developed the provisional themes that came to define the dissertation: instrumental and expressive logic, and the “Start, Start Again” pathway. These themes offered provisional answers to the “how” and “why” questions at the center of my research. I kept track of these emerging themes in respondent-level memos, which provided overviews of the main themes in each interview.

As I passed through multiple cases in this first round of reading and coding, I began compiling a list of conceptual themes that appeared to describe multiple cases, defining the analytic codes that comprised my cross-case analysis. Recording these in analytic memos helped me flesh out the theories I was developing and determined the boundaries of the concepts.
In contrast to this process of indexing large chunks of data and developing extensive memos before embarking on analytic coding, the most commonly cited guideline for approaching qualitative coding is a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Charmaz 2006). In grounded-theory coding, the analyst begins with the direct application of a first level of abstraction line-by-line to the text, known as “open coding.” In addition to positing a very specific relationship between the prior literature and theory generation (largely a non-existent one, where themes are purely emergent), Grounded Theory was developed when smaller interview samples were standard and prior to the existence of QDA software. Based on experience managing a team of graduate coders, I argue that using the software to apply conceptual abstraction to the text is ill-advised at such an early stage. The benefit of QDA software is that you can easily apply as many codes as you’d like; the challenge of software is that it allows you to apply far too many codes to be either useful or reliable. This is why the first read of the text was used for indexing the data and developing the contours of the concepts in thematic memos; the themes or theories were not yet ready to be applied to text in a reliable or valid way. Valid and reliable coding was necessary if I wanted to take full advantage of querying and conceptual testing features of QDA software. On the second, more focused, reading, I was well-positioned to apply thematic codes with reliability and validity.

Round two: application of analytic codes

If the first round of coding is about becoming descriptively familiar with the characteristics of the respondents and interview data, the second emphasized the reliable documentation of the analytic relationships that made up my story. The familiarity with
the transcripts that I built during the first reading meant that I was easily able to find the relevant chunks of the transcript for my research questions, one chapter at a time.

On the second reading, my goal was to limit the text I examined. I used the topic index codes to locate the relevant sections of the transcripts, and applied only one or two analytic codes at a time to the text. By focusing the process of thematic code application, I aimed to increase the reliability and validity of your coding. For example, I was able to apply the instrumental/expressive designations I generated during the topical coding round to 130 transcripts in approximately 10 hours. By using NVivo to extract the portions of the text where respondents talked about the reasons they attend school, I limited my second read to about 20% of the full transcripts. The first (indexing) reading of the 130 transcripts took upwards of 180 hours, not including memoing, and I believe that it would be nearly impossible to reliably apply conceptual abstractions over such a long period of time.

At this point, I found it very helpful to think of the analysis at two levels: textual evidence and person-level attributes. Recording conceptual categories as person-level attributes aided in the next step in the process, validation and theory refinement. For example, I read the interview excerpts, identifying instrumental and expressive logic as they appeared in the text. While most of the transcripts included instances of both types of logic, at the end of each case, I made a judgment about whether the respondent should be categorized as an instrumental, expressive or mixed thinker based on these codes, and noted this designation in the NVivo Classification Sheet. The analytic codes marked the transcript with textual evidence for my person-level claim recorded in the classification sheet. To make use of NVivo’s querying capabilities, which require the intersection of
codes, it is simplest to apply person-level designations to the entire transcript. Coding data in the Classification Sheet is like applying a code to the entire transcript. Querying the intersection of classifications and thematic codes—which is dependent on the reliability of the coding—made up the third part of my analytic procedure.

Round three: validate coding and test/refine theory

QDA software makes it relatively simple to examine the cross-case reliability of thematic coding. I did this by querying the intersection of person-level attributes and textual codes. For example, for each person-level categorization I recorded in the classification sheet for Chapter 5 (instrumental, expressive, or mixed), I output the text-level codes for instrumental and expressive logic. The process of reducing data down from full transcripts, to indexed extracts, and finally to how I applied analytic codes allowed me to judge whether I had used conceptually uniform criteria across the sample, increasing reliability or construct validity of my coding. Some respondents seemed misclassified when looking at the data in this reduced form, and I revised their classification accordingly, assuring the construct validity of my conceptual analysis.

Other features of the software can help an analyst test and refine the theoretical explanation she’s developed. For instance, there is considerable debate over methods for determining what counts as a robust finding in qualitative research. From my perspective, I do not believe that a phenomenon has to apply to the entire sample to be analytically important, but as a reader interested in analytic transparency, I would prefer to know whether a finding is the main trend or the exception that proves the rule. A systematic treatment of alternative explanations and negative cases is an important part of creating a convincing theory.
Blee (2009: 148) sets out the following criteria for a qualitative analytical plan, arguing that it should take into account “how will data be assessed to ensure that (1) all data are considered (2) spectacular/extraordinary events aren’t overly stressed, and (3) data that diverge from the pattern are not discounted without a clear rationale to do so.” I argue that the procedure outlined above, which follows a logic of theory generation (initial memo-writing) and theory testing (application of codes and examination of relationships, including alternative explanations) meets this standard.

If the analytic codes are applied reliably and person-level categorization is consistent, the coding queries enabled by QDA software can document the interpretive validity (Maxwell 1992:48) of the findings, identifying the robustness and limitations to the relationships I posited. On the frequentist end of the spectrum, which the software easily facilitates, the analyst may want to make statements such as “N respondents employed this logic.” As cautioned by scholars such as Small (2011), however, it’s important to make sure that such statements are appropriate for the form of the data. For instance, if the interview protocol evolved over the course of the study, and the same questions were not asked of everyone, it may not be appropriate to report coding counts as percentages of the sample.

While the easy production of frequency tables is a useful feature of QDA software, taking advantage of software doesn’t require a strong frequentist perspective. If one approaches analysis from a case-based perspective, a single disconfirming case or cluster of exceptions may crystallize the limitations of the theoretical explanation or help refine the working theory to account for the exceptions. From this perspective, it’s not the number of exceptions to the theme that is analytically important, but how the
exceptions help to refine the theory. The data querying capacity of QDA software allows you to easily identify cases that are exceptions to trends and require further examination.

In the end, the goal of systematic analysis, such as the one I undertake in this dissertation, is to support accounts of the data that meet the threshold of theoretical validity (Maxwell 1992). A theoretically valid explanation is an “abstract account that proposes to explain what has been observed,” whereby concepts and their relationships have a strong basis in the data (Silbey 2009: 81). Software can aid this process, by helping the analyst identify trends across cases, investigate alternative explanations, and quickly locate negative cases that help refine or limit the theoretical explanation.

Summary: Benefits of Systematic Coding

The process outlined above offers several distinct benefits, including improving procedural transparency and communicating the steps in analysis to ensure that arguments are solidly grounded in the data at hand. To recap the steps and their purpose:

- Get to know the data first by reading the whole transcripts, and writing a number of person-level and analytic memos to develop theories of important conceptual relationships in the data.

- Index hundreds of pages of data for easy retrieval (this general level is useful for the immediate project, but will also help you use the data later for other projects or share data with other researchers). This is also a very good way to share a qualitative project with a team—indexed data can be distributed to the members of a research team so that each researcher can apply her own thematic codes.
- Reliably and efficiently apply codes. Avoid wasting hours of time and muddying the story by over-coding. Use memo-writing for thematic development, and apply codes in the validation/refinement step using only a few concepts at a time.

- Take advantage of QDA data query capacities by producing text-level codes AND person-level classifications. Use queries of the intersection of these to validate coding reliability and examine patterns in themes. Identify meaningful exceptions to themes for limiting the scope or refining theory.

- A clear and systematic analytic process can increase transparency in qualitative research. Be more specific than “I analyzed the data using qualitative software.” Transparent analytical process makes qualitative analysis more easily replicable or reinterpretable.

An additional important benefit of the approach outlined here is that it provides a basis for sharing tasks in a team-based project. In a project with a large group of researchers, deciding how to divide up the data preparation tasks is no small part of qualitative data management. How do we assure that different coders apply codes consistently and reliably? Here, the topical index coding is a helpful place to start, because this level of descriptive coding is relatively straightforward. Once the level of indexing is complete, then the data can be distributed amongst members of a team for each author’s use in their own projects. I also believe that the descriptive indexing step sets data up in ways that could encourage qualitative data sharing (as recommended by NSF 2009) and secondary analysis by other researchers. Given the effort and resources—often public money—required for qualitative data collection and preparation,
secondary analysis of qualitative data is a largely untapped site for further generation of social scientific insight.
CHAPTER 3
START, START AGAIN: THE DECOUPLING OF PERSISTENCE AND COMPLETION AMONG DISADVANTAGED COLLEGE STUDENTS

Following graduation from a New Orleans public high school, teen mother Monique enrolled at Southern University at New Orleans, dreaming of studying psychology. Her first semester, she struggled to balance caring for her small child with her school work, and decided not to return the second semester. Monique moved home with her mother, and the following fall she began a short medical billing and coding program at a nearby for-profit technical school. There, she was frustrated by what she saw as “teachers who only helped the ones they liked,” and decided to not continue beyond a semester.

Monique entered our study as she began college a third time, this time at Delgado in a program in nursing assistance. Monique was enrolled for the final semester of that 18-month program the fall that Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, and her schooling was once again interrupted as she and her family relocated to Texas. When we spoke eight months after the hurricane, Monique was having difficulty transferring her credits and wasn’t attending school. By our second interview, a year and a half later, then 28-year-old Monique had given up on transfer and begun again at the local Texas community college, still with a goal of becoming a nurse. Monique reported that she had seven pre-requisite courses to complete, and hoped to continue her studies at the University of Houston. In the meantime, she balanced schoolwork, raising her two children, and catering for church events to bring in money to support her family.

Monique’s story is not what typically comes to mind when we imagine “going to college.” Nonetheless, only the minority of American college students follows a traditional pathway to a bachelor’s degree, defined by earning a high school diploma, enrolling full-time the semester following high school graduation, depending on parents for financial support, and not working or only working part-time during the school year. By this definition, recent estimates put the traditional undergraduate population at as little as one-fourth of American undergraduates (Choy 2002). And while institutional accountability statistics and national longitudinal surveys largely focus on retention within a single institution and timely degree completion, little research has devoted

4 All names are pseudonyms.
attention to students like Monique, whose pathways of persistence are marked by a series of starts, stops, and shifts lasting many years.

Monique’s pathway shares important features with those of many participants in The RISK Project, who, when interrupted by Hurricane Katrina, must navigate the rapidly expanding landscape of so-called “open door” institutions before them. Using survey data on persistence and degree completion, I find that only 13% of respondents earn a degree by 2009, five years into the study. However, nearly 30% continue to attend school and almost 80% of those not enrolled indicate they intend to enroll in the future. It’s a story of remarkable, if tenuous, persistence, even when compared to nationally-representative data on non-traditional community college students.

What can we learn from these young women’s persistence? Following a descriptive analysis of survey data, I use rich information from qualitative interviews to show how the diverse landscape of for-profit, distance learning, and technical training options now available to adult learners enables a distinct college trajectory, which I dub “Start, Start Again.” Previous survey-based research documents that many disadvantaged students “stop out” on the way to a degree, returning later to complete (Adelman 1999; Kalogrides and Grodsky 2011; McCormick 2003; Park 2014). The RISK data allow us to understand how, in the new open door marketplace, students who stall at one institution navigate a broad landscape of non-selective schools, programs, and delivery methods as they consider a return. When students switch programs in search of what they hope will be a better fit, the decision to start again is not without consequences. For students who don’t succeed and “start, start again,” the resulting decoupling of persistence and
completion becomes an important force for the reproduction of educational and socioeconomic inequality.

NATIONAL CONTEXT

Persistence and Completion of Non-Traditional Community College Students

In order to contextualize the RISK Project’s data, I begin by reporting nationally-representative data on persistence and attainment of American community college students. The National Center for Education Statistics’ Beginning Postsecondary Survey (BPS) collects longitudinal enrollment and completion data on several cohorts of first-time college students in American colleges and universities. The BPS:2004/09 follows a cohort of college students beginning Fall 2003 until six years later, Spring 2010. These data allow us to estimate the amount of degree completion and continued enrollment for all students beginning in community colleges near the time when RISK Project students were randomized into Opening Doors Louisiana.

In contrast to the RISK Project population, the BPS sample is drawn from the population of first-time college-goers. This is not unique to BPS; first-time students are typically the focal population in large, nationally-representative surveys of college pathways. Institution-level enrollment and completion data are even further circumscribed: these are usually limited to the federally-required reporting categories of full-time, first-time, degree-seeking students. By excluding part-time students, returning students, and those who take coursework outside of a degree program, federally-mandated institution-level data support measures of timely completion for purposes of institutional accountability. But these criteria also bias studies of college enrollment and
persistence toward relatively advantaged students. At any given time, a large proportion of students who attend open door institutions are not first-time college students or do not seek a degree. The comparison of BPS data and data from the RISK Project presented in this chapter will therefore make clear the limitations of traditional data collection for studying the college careers of the most disadvantaged students.

Yet, while all BPS:2004/09 respondents are first-time college-goers, BPS data do allow for the examination of persistence and attainment by several other markers of non-traditional student status. The seven survey measures included in BPS are delayed enrollment, part-time attendance, being financially independent of parents, working full time while enrolled, having dependents of their own, being a single parent, and earning a GED or high school completion certificate instead of a regular diploma. In Fall 2004, 45% of BPS students reported no non-traditional characteristics. Among those reporting at least one, the average was 2.78 (SD 1.63). To contextualize the RISK population, most RISK interview participants indicate between five and seven of these characteristics, placing them among the most disadvantaged American college students. In this analysis, I will use the group of BPS students with six or seven characteristics as comparable “highly non-traditional” students.

In Figure 3.1, I report BPS:04/09 data on persistence and completion of first-time community college students three years into the study, or at 150% of normative time to an associate’s degree, which is a benchmark accountability statistic for 2-year colleges. Nationally, student progress varies significantly by the number of non-traditional factors they report: after three years, nearly three-quarters of highly non-traditional students had not earned a degree and were no longer enrolled. At three years, approximately 20% of
the most disadvantaged students were still attending a 2-year institution; 1.1% had made a transfer to a four-year institution; and about 5% had attained a technical certificate or degree. In comparison, only 30% of the most advantaged students were not enrolled and no longer attending, and 20% had earned an associate’s or bachelor’s degree. For the students most comparable to the RISK population, nearly all students had not attained a degree or certificate within three years of first beginning college.

In Figure 3.2, we see that the strong relationship between non-traditional characteristics and likelihood of degree completion persists to six years after beginning college.
college. While nearly half of traditional students earn a degree within six years, only about 14% of those with the largest number of non-traditional indicators do.

![Figure 3.2: Six-year Attainment of First-time Community College Students (BPS:04/09)](image)

Interestingly, for the nationally-representative sample, there is no relationship between disadvantage and enrollment short-of-degree six years later: a little less than 20% of all students who have yet to earn a degree are enrolled in Spring 2010. Given that the normative time to an associate’s degree for a full-time community college student is two years, these data indicate the extent to which community college is not simply a singular, sequential stop in the transition to adulthood for many of today’s students. For students beginning in such institutions, college-going is an endeavor that can stretch over many years. Even for students who begin in community colleges as “traditional”
students—enrolling in the Fall after high school graduation, depending on parents for financial support, and working less than half-time—college may ultimately interact with a host of adult responsibilities such as raising children, caring for parents, and working for pay, to name just a few. National data show that nearly one in five students continues to attend school six years after beginning at a community college. These careers, stretching over many years, are an important phenomenon that requires more attention from researchers.

**THE RISK PROJECT DATA**

*Survey: Persistence, Completion, and Plans to Return*

With this national context in mind, I turn to the RISK survey data to describe the completion and persistence of these economically vulnerable young women five years after the study began. I document the surprising persistence observed among these students, most of whom do not meet the survey criteria of large-scale surveys of college-goers. I also capitalize on the richer set of survey variables available in the RISK data, including respondents’ statements of their future educational plans, to underline the extent of persistence. Table 3.1 reports data on respondents’ college attainment and enrollment at 60 months by their baseline educational goals.
Table 3.1. Attainment at Five Years by Baseline Reason for Enrolling (N=742)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Attainment at 5 years</th>
<th>BA Transfer</th>
<th>AA Degree</th>
<th>LT Degree</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Earned AA or BA (%)</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending Short of Credential (%)</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Attending (%)</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>62.8</td>
<td>57.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column proportion of sample</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>742</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reflective of the role of community colleges in the US, the young women began Opening Doors with a range of goals. The majority of respondents, however, pursued formal degrees: an associate’s degree or transfer to a bachelor’s degree program. A plurality sought a terminal associate’s degree, and smaller proportions sought a bachelor’s degree transfer or attended with goals less than a degree. In the table, the “LT degree” category collapses responses of “certificate” and “job skills/other.” In this bivariate table, I find that degree completion is not significantly related to students’ primary reason for enrolling.

The vast majority of degree-seekers did not attain their baseline goals within five years. Consistent with the most-disadvantaged students from BPS:2004/09, about 13% of the RISK sample completed a degree despite the interruption of Hurricane Katrina. Notably, degree completion does not vary significantly by the student’s primary reason for enrolling in the study: high initial goals alone did not prompt higher achievement. Consistent with evidence that some students’ aspirations “warm up,” increasing after exposure to college (Alexander, Bozick and Entwisle 2008), a proportion of the RISK
participants outperformed their initial goal: 10% of certificate/skills-seeking students actually earned a degree within five years of enrolling in the study.

A substantial proportion of the RISK population actively persisted towards their goals five years after initial enrollment. Nearly 30% of respondents were attending college two years following Katrina, or five years after initially enrolling. RISK Project respondents with the highest aspirations (BA-seekers) were slightly more likely than the other categories to still be enrolled. Importantly, the percentage of students persisting short of a degree is 50% higher here than among nationally-representative data: recall that only 20% of the most disadvantaged BPS respondents were enrolled six years into their college pathways.

What about students who were not enrolled at the time of the survey? Reflective of low rates of degree completion within community colleges, more than half of study participants did not earn a degree and were not attending school at the five-year survey. Should we interpret their temporary non-enrollment as the end of their college pathway? Unlike the nationally-representative data, the RISK Project survey also collects data on participants’ future educational plans. Reported in Table 3.2, these data make it plain that not currently attending is not an effective proxy for leveled aspiration. Students who are not enrolled express a strong expectation to return, and few of the women in this study who have yet to earn a credential believe they have had enough education.

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5 In reality, this number is likely higher, as the fielding period for the RISK 2-year post-Katrina survey extended into the summer months. The survey asked whether respondents were “currently enrolled” in a college or training program. As this population has tenuous connection to school from one semester to the next, this measure likely biases responses downwards, not capturing the students who are taking a regularly-scheduled summer term off.
Table 3.2 is restricted to only those students who are not currently attending school. Nearly all respondents who initially sought a bachelor’s degree and the vast majority of associate’s degree-seekers report that they plan to return to college in the coming year. Even the majority of students who did not seek a formal credential indicate that they have plans to return to school.

Table 3.2. Future Educational Plans, for Respondents Not Enrolled at 60 Months (N=410)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary reason for enrolling (baseline)</th>
<th>BA Transfer</th>
<th>AA Degree</th>
<th>LT Degree</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plans to continue in the next year (%)</td>
<td>91.5</td>
<td>81.8</td>
<td>69.9</td>
<td>78.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No plans to continue in next year (%)</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I have as much education as I want&quot; (%)</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I plan to continue later, but now is not a good time&quot; (%)</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>82.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not enough time (N)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can’t afford it (N)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowhere convenient to go (N)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Few RISK Project respondents believe they have completed enough education as of the five-year survey. The vast majority of those with no impending plans to return (80%) declare they would like to return at a later date. Rather than lack of aspiration, respondents who report that “now is not a good time” to continue school express concrete barriers to their return: not enough time, they can’t afford it, or there are no options that are convenient to them. Fewer than one in five without plans to continue (4% of those not currently enrolled) report that they have completed as much education as they want. While the two are conceptually blurred—due to data limitations—in most prior studies of
“Cooling-Out,” these data make it clear that lack of attainment is decidedly different than leveled aspiration for the RISK respondents.

To summarize, five years after enrolling in the study, few of these low-income young mothers have earned a degree, yet their persistence is remarkably high. The RISK survey data document that, compared to a nationally-representative population of non-traditional students, a substantial proportion of respondents actively pursues a degree five years into the study. Further, the vast majority of those who don’t attend report their intention to continue. All told, it’s a picture of a striking degree of persistence.

**Beyond Snapshots: Qualitative College Pathways**

While survey data offer a snapshot of students’ educational outcomes at a single point in time, the degree to which students report a desire to return underlines the persistent but tenuous connections of this population to the educational process. The RISK Project’s nested interviews offer an opportunity to qualitatively understand the nature of students’ persistence pathways—and draw substantively important distinctions between them. In-depth studies of college pathways are particularly important for non-traditional student populations in a context of life-long learning, and researchers increasingly argue that educational attainment should be understood as a process that unfolds over time and interacts with other aspects of the transition to adulthood (Giudici and Pallas 2014; Roksa and Velez 2012). We already know that, for many students, college careers are more fluid and winding than assumed by popular notions of college-going and much of the research based in the status-attainment tradition, which measures attainment at a single point in young adulthood (Deil-Amen and Turley 2007; Roksa and Velez 2010; Goldrick-Rab 2006). By capitalizing on the educational histories from the
RISK interviews, I demonstrate the limitations of survey measures for capturing important qualitative variation in respondents’ pathways through college. Within an overall trend towards persistent expectations, not all pathways are equally likely to lead to a degree or credential.

Rather than beginning with the focal Opening Doors institutions, the RISK interview protocol probes all institutions that respondents attended since high school. While Opening Doors required that students had completed no prior college-level credits, 75% of qualitative respondents report in their interviews that had attended at least one higher educational institution prior to enrolling in the study. In some of these cases, prior college attendance was limited to remedial coursework, marked by incomplete or failed courses, or comprised of technical training rather than college-level academic work. However, some respondents did have substantial engagement with higher education prior to Opening Doors. In addition to a list of institutions the respondents attended, we strived to identify substantive programs they pursued, and probe their logic for choosing these programs. From these data, I categorized each respondent’s status at the time of the interview. Table 3.3 reports these findings.

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6 Barrow et al (2011:7) report that “The study targeted low-income parents who were primarily first-term students at the college although some continuing students ready to move from remedial/developmental-level courses to college-level courses were also accepted into the program.” Based on qualitative data, it appears that prior engagement with higher education was much higher among this group than screening questionnaires suggested.
Only five of the interview respondents reported that they earned a degree during the study period; four of these were associate’s degrees and one was a bachelor’s. While most survey respondents who were not enrolled reported plans to return to school, when probed in interviews, 39 of the 102 interviewees did not have specific plans to re-enroll. The majority of interview respondents told us that they would like to return to school someday, but they were qualitatively coded as “not persistent” if they did not articulate specific plans to return in the near future, identifying a particular degree objective or school. This points to the need for better-designed survey questions that can capture the difference between generalized aspiration and more concrete expectations or plans.

**Respondents who were no longer persistent**

While studies of higher education tend to privilege completion above all else, not all interviewees who had not completed a degree were unsatisfied with their education. Notably, qualitative data reveal that the group of “not persistent” students included a subset that was satisfied with the job skills they had picked up without earning a degree. For instance, 27-year-old Erica had attended college “off and on” between high school graduation and the hurricane, completing remedial coursework, computer skills courses,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualitative Educational Pathway</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Earned Degree</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Persistent</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with skills without a degree</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop out/No plans to return</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistent</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stop Out</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start, Start Again</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total N</strong></td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and other general distribution requirements. When we spoke in 2009, Erica was living in the Dallas area, not attending school, and had no plans to return; she had secured a salaried job with benefits in a physical therapist’s office and was able to learn the specialized skills she needed through on-the-job training.

While Erica considered her college attendance a success despite her lack of completion, two-thirds of non-persistent students had, for one reason or another, abandoned their educational plans despite maintaining career aspirations they had yet to achieve. Tasha was one of these students; she reported in the survey that she planned to return to college in the future, but her interview data suggested that these “plans” were far from certain. Tasha enrolled in our study planning to attend the Opening Doors institution for a surgical technician program, but was frustrated by the remedial courses she had to take before she could begin credit-bearing coursework:

Interviewer: Did you have to take remedial courses at Delgado?
Tasha: I had to take the Math and the English and I was not passing it. It just felt that I was going to be there forever ‘cause once you do the Math and English 101, you have to go to the second part of it. Then you have to go to the third part, when you actually get into your courses that you have to take for your program and everything. So I just felt like it was a prolonged situation, and at Gretna, you didn’t have to take no remedials, you just go straight into the course.

After Katrina, instead of returning to the community college, Tasha enrolled at Gretna Career, a for-profit career college that popped up in New Orleans post-hurricane for an expensive course in medical billing and coding. She mistakenly believed that completing the course would leave her certified, but later found out that there was a “four

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7 This college has since been shut by the US Department of Education for violation of the terms required for securing student loan assistance. It is not the only institution that popped up in New Orleans in the wake of Katrina, only to close later, stranding students with non-transferable credits short of a degree.
hundred dollar test that was like it was in another language, it was so totally different from the course we took.” Tasha was unable to pass this certification test, but her time at Gretna Career left her with a sizable student loan to repay and skepticism about the link between postsecondary education and her career goals. Tasha was not alone among respondents in regretting her stint with private vocational training; many respondents reported that the decision to prioritize perceived expediency did not pay off, and they were unable to get work in the fields they studied. When asked why they were not working in-field, some vocational students reported that they learned too late that their school was poorly regarded by employers. Others, like Tasha, were unable to pass the certification exams required in many of the most popular fields pursued by women in the study: nursing assistance, dental assistance, and cosmetology. These fields all require certification examinations for employment, and students who were unable to pass remedial coursework at the community college were often the same ones who struggled to pass these exams after completing “quick, hands-on training programs” in these vocational fields.

When we spoke to Tasha at age 28, two years after Katrina, she was working as a desk clerk in a New Orleans hotel and questioned the value of returning to school: “As far as school-wise, when you get out from school you maybe can’t get the job that you really want ‘cause they don’t have it in the economy, you know?” After a year working in housekeeping—“a hard department to get out of”—Tasha was promoted to her current full-time front desk clerk position and was proud to see her hard work recognized by the hotel management. While she continued to dream of what she described as a “real career, like a secretary or something,” she was skeptical that more education would guarantee
that she could reach that goal; she noted that many of the applicants to the hotel clerk job she now held had BA degrees themselves. Tasha reported that she would not consider herself a successful adult until she had attained an office-based career, but for the time being, the relative safety of her current job outweighed the uncertainty she associated with pursuing more education.

_Persistence Pathways: Stopping Out vs. Starting Again_

Analyzing students’ narrative education histories from high school to the present, two distinct pathways emerged. In contrast to Tasha’s sequence of distinct programs, the first of these resembles the “stopping out” documented by research using longitudinal surveys (Adelman 1999). In survey-based research, “stopping out” is a retrospective designation, assigned to a student once she returns from a break to re-enroll in school. While graduation within normative time frames remains the key measurement for community college institutional accountability, stopping out is a routine part of community college careers; a sizable portion of students who stop out return to complete a degree (Park 2014).

Using qualitative data, I coded a RISK respondent’s pathway as “stopping out” if the enrollment spells she described were associated with cumulative progress towards a degree. Respondents who Stopped Out returned to the same or a similar type of institution (for instance, a community college in the same state), where their prior credits were applied toward a cumulative goal. For example, while Stopped Out for the hurricane, 29-year-old Krystal reported shifting goals from a Licensed Practical Nursing program to a shorter Certified Nursing Assistant certificate. Though her educational objectives changed, the basic courses for these programs overlap and credits were
generally able to transfer, so this change did not impede Krystal’s progress towards completing a credential. Half of persistent respondents’ pathways were similarly categorized as “stopping out.” While the timeline to completion for students Stopping Out may be extended, they were either pursuing or planning to continue in the general direction of their initial goal. The main contrasts between the Stopping Out and Starting Again pathways are outlined in Figure 3.3.

![Figure 3.3. Characteristics of Persistence Pathways](image)

The other half of students, like Tasha and Monique, described a conceptually distinct pathway, which I dub “Start, Start Again.” Students who Start Again attend a series of institutional types, often over a period of many years, in search of a program that they feel could work for them. They also tended to try on several distinct fields of study. Recall Monique, who studied psychology at a four year college, medical billing at a technical institute, and nursing assistance in community colleges in two states. These
programs have no discernible overlap in core requirements, and credits are difficult to transfer among institutions, so persistence is not cumulative towards a degree.

As students shift from in-person classes at the community college to online classes with a for-profit, to hands-on technical training, they abandon prior credits, delay their goal of work that pays a living wage, and often accumulate burdensome student debt. Yet, the lure of a flexible program completed on one’s own schedule often proved difficult to resist. Cynthia, a married 27-year-old mother of three was displaced to Houston, where her family settled after the hurricane. Over several enrollment spells since finishing high school, Cynthia was making slow progress towards her degree at Delgado, but without the childcare help of her extended family, she had a hard time imagining attending class on campus in Houston. When she re-enrolled, she chose an online program at a large for-profit chain over the local community college:

Interviewer: How did you decide to enroll online?
Cynthia: I didn’t want to wait until my time was more flexible for me to be able to go into the campus and sit in the classes. With work, the kids, [traditional classes] just weren’t a good fit at that time. That’s why I tried the online. I tried two semesters. I actually should have learned from the first semester not to do online, but I tried to do online again, and I wasn’t successful.

Interviewer: It does sound hard. Were there some things about that program, or about online learning that you liked?
Cynthia: The reason that I got into it was because of the flexibility, that I don’t have to be there, so I can still do what I need to do at home, and still go to school at the same time. That was the idea I liked, but after getting into it, I was like, “I can’t do this.” You know, my assignments would be due a certain time, and I would have forgotten to do it, get caught up in everyday life, and dates would be passing by, and I was like, I’m not going to be able to do this.

Interviewer: So, it sounds like it was pretty hard to do that and do everything else you needed to do.
Cynthia: Yeah, but I’m planning to go back to school. This time I’m going to go to Emmanuel Temple, and I’m going to pursue a degree in theology. With this school the classes are so interesting, and I really want to learn more about God, they’ll be teaching me the things, you know, that I didn’t know.
Interviewer: Uh-huh. And what do you think you would have been doing with [school] had the hurricane not happened?
Cynthia: Well, I’m sure I would have finished. Finished Business at Delgado.

Cynthia learned of the online program from a billboard on her commute to her children’s school, and enrolled over the phone. Emmanuel Temple, the unaccredited bible college she applied to for the coming semester, recruited students at her church. Several of the other church members also attended this institution, and spoke highly of the charismatic professors they felt brought them closer to God. But Cynthia’s latest choice would mean abandoning her prior college credits and, arguably, doing little to bring her closer to her stated career goal of owning and managing a small business.

Like Cynthia, many students reported that community colleges were not the only institutions they attended before Opening Doors. A substantial number (27) of the interview respondents began their college careers at a four-year college—primarily historically black colleges or regional public universities—immediately after high school. For these respondents, enrollment at the Opening Doors institutions represented a backwards transfer. Research has shown that this “safety net” function of community colleges is particularly important for disadvantaged students (Kalogrides and Grodsky 2011), who are significantly more likely than traditional college students to transfer down or drop out of higher education completely. However, the qualitative RISK data suggest that when attendance at the community college doesn’t stick, such students turn into ones who Start Again, often attending a third type of institution along the way to their degree.

*Displacement and Persistence Pathways*

The semester of Hurricane Katrina, the Delgado campuses were poised to serve a record-breaking 17,400 students. Nearly all of the physical Delgado campuses suffered
some storm-related damage. The largest Delgado campus, City Park, served nearly 11,000 students. Six to eight feet of water flooded the low-lying campus areas and 65% of the buildings suffered storm-related damage. The National Guard was stationed on campus for weeks, helping with security and cleanup before the city-wide evacuation was lifted. While the campuses were in physical disrepair, Delgado administrators and faculty worked to expand its online course offerings, growing from 25 to 170 online courses. In the following semester, many of Delgado’s courses continued to be offered online only, as the campus, and broader city, struggled with repairs. However, 10,002 students “returned” for the Spring 2006 semester, almost 60% of pre-hurricane enrollment (Delgado Community College, ND).

The qualitative data indicate that Stopping Out and Starting Again characterized many students’ college careers even before Katrina, but what can we learn from the disaster’s shock to their college attendance? Given that interview respondents were split between Louisiana and Texas at the time of the interview, I am able to examine whether pathways differ for students who relocated outside of the New Orleans area. The main finding is that interruption to a program offers an opportunity to switch directions, and that students do have an eye to the variety of open door options they face. Many students who were not enrolled at the time of the interview named more than one institution they were thinking of possibly attending. The challenges discussed by respondents who relocated also point to roadblocks to re-entering community college that push some students into for-profits or shorter technical certification programs instead.
Table 3.4 breaks out respondents’ qualitative pathways by their residential location at the time of the interview. Notably, all five of the respondents who completed a degree had returned to New Orleans, which allowed them to pick up their education where it left off without losing any credits in transfer. Thirty-four year old Kelly was one of these completers, earning an Associate’s Degree in Accounting from Delgado institution in 2009. Kelly held an early childhood education certification from her early 20s, and liked her job as a nursery school assistant. But she found it did not pay enough for her to take care of her three children, and so she enrolled in Opening Doors in 2004 seeking work in a field with better salary prospects. She took a full course load in accounting while working full-time in sales for a large national retailer as she pursued her degree.

At the time of the hurricane, Kelly had completed the first of her two years of courses. The semester that Katrina hit, she, her children, and her mother were temporarily displaced to Houston, where Kelly was able to transfer her sales job and pick up additional work at night to save money for their return. When Delgado re-opened, Kelly and her family returned to New Orleans and she immediately re-enrolled. In her final semester, she was hired by one of her instructors as an accounting assistant at his accounting firm. She enjoys this job and hopes to stay indefinitely, though she feels that her community college education did not fully prepare her for the demands of working as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>New Orleans</th>
<th>Texas</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Col%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop Out</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistent</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stopped Out</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start, Start Again</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.4. Qualitative Persistence Pathways by Interview Location
an accountant. “I thought I was prepared until I actually got in there,” Kelly reported. “And it was just like the stuff that I learned in school was totally different from being in the field. It’s different, and I realize I need to learn a whole lot more.” When we spoke in Summer 2009, Kelly had transferred her community college credits to a local four-year college, and would begin working part-time towards her Bachelor’s in Accounting in the fall. For Kelly, *the hurricane represented a temporary stop out on the way to her degree*, and securing a job in her field of study primed her for more education yet.

Beyond the group of completers, all of whom returned to New Orleans, *the main difference in students’ pathways by whether they relocated or returned was the proportion whose pathways are characterized as Starting Again*. About 38% of those who permanently relocated versus 22% of those who returned described Start Again pathways. Knowing the price of starting again, some students made the decision to return to Louisiana specifically to continue their education without losing momentum. Thirty-nine year old Tonya, who attended a four-year college out of high school and earned a massage therapist license at a technical college earlier in her career, was one semester away from finishing her nursing program and steadily paying work as a Licensed Practical Nurse when Katrina hit New Orleans. For Tonya, starting over in the Texas community college system would have stalled her progress, and so her family made temporary sacrifices for her to complete her work:

Tonya: I had to go to Baton Rouge to finish because all of the Texas schools wanted me to start over, to at least do two semesters. They wanted me to take an entrance exam and they wanted me to do all these things. I could have went back to New Orleans in November, but nothing was ready, my mom's house wasn't even ready for us to move back in. So that wasn't going to work. I ended up going to Louisiana Technical College in Baton Rouge to finish my last clinicals in February. My daughter went back to Alabama to live with my mom and my son stayed with my sister at her
apartment in Houston, so my family got dispersed again. That was in the beginning of 2006 and I graduated from nursing school in May.

Tonya passed her nursing board examination in Texas in August 2006, and was hired into a large government agency, a job that she had held for nearly three years when we spoke with her. Partially explaining higher rates of Starting Again among those who settled away from New Orleans, other respondents, like Tonya, reported difficulties transferring even public, community college credits to different states’ community college systems. States set their own cut-off scores for remedial skills examinations, and it is possible that students who were successfully completing credit-bearing courses in the Louisiana system would not pass these other exams, having to take remedial coursework all over in another state. This lack of articulation among the public sector schools contributed to the pattern of Start, Start Again for a handful of interview respondents who did not return to New Orleans. When faced with the prospect of being placed back into remedial coursework, others who Started Again chose to enroll in an online or for-profit course that promised a speedier route to a degree.

DISCUSSION: STARTING AGAIN IN THE NEW OPEN DOOR LANDSCAPE

Hurricane Katrina disrupted the lives and college careers of the young women enrolled in the RISK Project’s study. But, these students’ complete postsecondary histories demonstrate that, for the majority, the hurricane was simply one more in a long line of educational interruptions and challenges. The 102 women named at least 75 distinct institutions they had attended, which is quite a feat given that nearly all lived most of their lives in the immediate area of New Orleans or were interviewed in one of two Texas metro areas. Indicative of their winding college pathways, three-quarters of
respondents had attended at least one other postsecondary institution before enrolling in our study, and several, like Monique and Tonya, had attended even more.

Comparatively high levels of persistence into adulthood and the “Start, Start Again” pathway I describe point to how the diverse set of open door higher education options—with few or no requirements for prior academic performance—shape students’ enrollment decisions and their likelihood of continuing toward a degree or credential. In Clark’s (1960, 1961) functional analysis of community college’s role in managing students’ outsized ambition, the experience of setbacks and the active work of college personnel combined in an institutionally-orchestrated process of “soft denial.” According to this model, struggling students in the community college would recognize their academic limitations and, as a result, either reduce their aspirations or quit altogether. Previous empirical work within single institutions suggests that efforts to destigmatize poor performance and retain students at all costs mean the messages are rarely so clear (Bahr 2008; Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2002). With the rapid expansion of education providers specifically targeted at adult learners, students frustrated in one institution have many new “open doors” to walk through.

To my knowledge, this is the first mixed-method longitudinal study to examine college pathways in the new open door landscape. While some may judge these students for their poor information or lack of direction, it’s important to note that a degree of career exploration is institutionalized even in the four-year college experience. In four-year contexts, students are typically required to fulfill disciplinary distribution requirements as part of their degree program. Thus, the early portion of a bachelor’s degree offers students an opportunity to explore fields of study before committing to one,
and decisions are usually coupled with academic counseling to help students plan a schedule that will allow them to match their education to their goals and fulfill requirements in a timely manner. For this reason, the Start Again pathway observed among the RISK respondents can also be seen as a side-effect of the institutions they attend and the type of programs many students pursue: narrow vocational certifications with few overlapping requirements between programs or fields of study. In this context, where shifts in goals represent real setbacks, the importance of impartial informational counseling could not be overstated. Many students, like Tasha, shift into for-profit certification programs where “admissions counselors” promise a quick pathway to completion. Too often, however, students report that these decisions, which seemed expedient at the time, did not bear out as they had hoped in terms of supporting new careers.

Most importantly, the qualitative distinction between Stopping Out and Starting Again would be difficult or impossible to identify using either institutional accountability statistics—which exclude students who are part-time or have previously attended college—or nationally representative longitudinal survey measures of persistence, which capture enrollment spells for first-time students, but do not account for the degree of setback associated with starting anew. While the nationally-representative data reported early in this chapter indicate that college careers stretch long beyond normative timelines

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8 At the time of data collection, many for-profit institutions used high-pressure, even fraudulent techniques to enroll students (GAO 2010). “Admissions counselors” at for-profit institutions are actually salespeople, and at the time some companies paid their representatives commission for securing enrollments. While commission-based pay schemes are now illegal in the industry, admissions staff, particularly at large chain institutions, are trained to carefully connect to and exploit the vulnerability and desperation of prospective students (Campbell and Deil-Amen 2012).
for many first-time community college students, the RISK population is unique in that many respondents enter the study in their mid- to late-20s, long into their postsecondary lives, allowing us to understand the true nature and degree of these elongated timelines.

Most research on college careers assumes that persistence is a categorically positive thing, but the distinction between Stopping Out and Start, Start Again that I develop in this chapter complicates the picture. It appears that Start, Start Again represents an emerging pathway through college over time, where persistence is decoupled from completion and “returning to school” often actually means beginning again from scratch rather than picking up where one left off. Students who do not attend college immediately after high school were once considered the “forgotten half” of American young people (Rosenbaum 2001). Today, students who have attended “some college” but are yet to complete a credential are a rising proportion of American young adults, leading Rosenbaum and colleagues (Rosenbaum et al. 2015) to identify “the new forgotten half.” Research attention is only beginning to be paid to the nature and consequences of their college persistence.

A limitation of this analysis is that Hurricane Katrina may have induced some amount of “Start, Start Again” in the study population. Physical displacement often required starting college pathways anew, either because of difficulty transferring credits from one community college system to another or difficulty moving student records. Other respondents, planning to permanently relocate away from New Orleans, may have recognized that their training needs differed based upon the labor market in their new communities. At the same time, many respondents already had a pathway that could be labeled “Start, Start Again” before the hurricane, attending multiple institutions prior to
Katrina. Others had, for various reasons, not planned to enroll that semester but hoped to return to school in the future. Future work on highly non-traditional student populations should attempt to estimate the prevalence of “Start, Start Again” versus “stopping out” over the course of college careers.

Based on analysis of respondents’ postsecondary pathways from high school graduation into their late 20s and early 30s, I thus argue that the RISK data offer important insights into how an understudied population navigates a landscape of changing educational options, and how students’ enrollment decisions are related to their likelihood of success. With the expansion of for-profit college and distance learning programs targeted at busy working adults, the large proportion of American young people leaving college without a credential becomes a pool of potential college completers. This chapter’s results suggest that these new “opportunities” bring their own challenges, perhaps particularly for the most educationally and socioeconomically disadvantaged among us. In the next chapter, I will report on how students understand the value of a college degree, which lies at the center of their remarkable persistence.
CHAPTER 4
INSTRUMENTAL AND EXPRESSIVE: “VALUING” COLLEGE IN THE FACE OF POVERTY

Why do so many adult learners continue to start again in college, despite mounting evidence that a college degree will not come easily to them? The prevailing theory of leveled aspirations, Clark’s (1961) Cooling-out Hypothesis, predicts that when high-aspiring but underprepared students face barriers in community college, the experience of setbacks will prompt them to revise their goals downwards toward more probable outcomes. But the data presented in the prior chapter are more in-line with recent empirical work suggesting that college aspirations appear more resilient than predicted by the Cooling-out Hypothesis (Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle 2008; Bahr 2008; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006). As college careers stretch further into adulthood, how do students understand the meaning and value of a college degree?

In this chapter, I examine the cultural logics of persistent aspiration among the group of low-income African-American mothers in The RISK Project. Through qualitative analysis of interview data, two logics of education emerge. Instrumentally, respondents believe that postsecondary education will offer the skills necessary to escape the low-wage labor market. Expressively, the moral status of being a college student allows the women to project and enact a narrative of upward mobility, despite mounting evidence of the challenges they face in achieving the economic stability they seek. The majority of respondents utilize both types of logic as they discuss their college decision-making. As such, I argue that, for economically vulnerable young mothers, the process of “valuing” a college degree involves both economic and moral calculations.
Respondents’ educational logics affect how they interpret setbacks, explaining students’ persistence even after encountering significant challenges.

**BACKGROUND**

“Valuing” Education in Cultural Context

The Cooling Out Hypothesis casts leveled aspirations as disadvantaged students’ protracted recalculation of their best likely outcomes, given personal experience with the challenges they face. In the face of empirical evidence that many students persist far into adulthood, a more robust theory of aspirations is required. Recent work by Frye (2012) suggests that the formation of educational aspirations is deeply entwined with students’ visions of self, and should not be understood as the result of a rational process. Weaving together content analysis of documents such as school curricula, newspaper stories, and NGO materials with in-depth interviews with schoolgirls in Malawi, Frye describes a cultural environment that privileges future orientation and defines educational achievement as morally virtuous. In this context, she argues that schoolgirls’ educational aspirations—their “imagined futures”—should be interpreted as assertions of their current moral standing rather than their logical estimations of their future outcomes. Frye’s work suggests that attention to how the shared meaning of education is culturally constructed may help us understand why unlikely aspirations form. Her cross-sectional interviews with teenagers, however, cannot speak to whether and why unrealistic aspirations persist over time, as students gain first-hand experience of the difficulties they will face.
In this chapter, I extend Frye’s insights about the cultural construction of education’s value to the American context, to examine whether and how the moral valence of college-going encourages the RISK respondents’ persistence and continued high aspirations. Key features of the American cultural context bear mention. First, the rhetoric of the American College for All movement—largely responsible for students’ steadily climbing goals—includes strong appeals to economic rationality. College as an “investment in your future” is a cultural logic all its own, one that looks much like instrumental rationality. In their overview of the sociological study of morality, Hitlin and Vaisey argue that research in cultural sociology makes it clear that “moral motivation exists, but these motivations struggle with one another and with non-moral concerns in their expression” (2013: 53). Given how tightly education and economic security are intertwined in contemporary American reality and imagination, it would not be surprising to see both economic logic and considerations of moral status at play in how disadvantaged students understand the meaning and value of a college degree in America.

Second, though the quality varies widely, the supply of postsecondary educational “opportunities” in America is virtually unlimited. This is not new. The American education system has long been noted as a comparatively open regime of “contest mobility” where “elite status is the result of an open contest, with every effort made to keep lagging contestants in until the climax” (Turner 1960: 855). What is new is that the recent rapid expansion of the open door sector—including for-profit training programs and distance learning options—has diversified potential completers’ options for second (or third) chances at a college credential (Deming, Goldin, and Katz 2012). In fact, these new educational forms are often targeted specifically towards older students who have
struggled in previous postsecondary attempts (Campbell and Deil-Amen 2012). While the odds of completion for those choosing these options remain slim, as seen in the previous chapter, these choices further facilitate the continued pursuit of a credential for students who retain aspirations for a college degree.

**ANALYSIS PLAN**

The interview data presented in this chapter were fully transcribed and coded using NVivo 10 software for qualitative data analysis. To facilitate data retrieval, a team of graduate student coders began by applying “topic codes” to the transcripts, indexing the data by interview question (See Chapter 2). After this basic step of data preparation, I read each transcript front-to-back. I verified the index coding of the education and adulthood modules using a code-by-document matrix to revisit interviews that appeared to have missing data. This step was particularly important given the semi-structured nature of the interviews and the multiple interviewers working on the project team. During this first reading, I summarized each respondent’s postsecondary education history to gain a better understanding of the pathway she traveled over time. I also generated analytic memos on emerging cross-case themes, including the instrumental and expressive educational logics reported in this paper.

To enable reliable application of analytic codes, I then extracted the portions of the interviews related to educational history and the transition to adulthood (See Appendix B). The excerpted portions of the interviews ranged from 5% to 33% of the full interview transcripts. Based upon the emergent constructs from the thematic memos, I coded all interview excerpts for textual evidence of instrumental and expressive logic.
Defining Instrumental and Expressive

To understand the persistence of students over time, I utilize Weber’s (1978/1922) key distinction between goal- and value-oriented—or instrumental and expressive—action. As summarized by Hamilton, the concept of instrumental action frames action as means to a desired end, while expressive action is the “behavioral expression of a value” (1991:320). To put it simply, instrumental action is oriented toward practical ends while expressive action is concerned with the symbolic meaning of the activity itself. Based upon the emergent data in the first round of coding, the primary conceptual distinction in this chapter is between (instrumental) economic calculations and moral (expressive) ones.

Previously, educational gerontologists have applied instrumental and expressive labels to differentiate among types of educational activities (Havighurst 1964; Heimstra 1972, 1976; Londoner 1985, 1990; Peterson 1983). In this literature, primarily concerned with educational planning and practice, instrumental education is defined as learning that is valuable for later use, while expressive education consists of activities pursued for their own sake (Havighurst 1964). In Havighurst’s formulation, educational activities—for instance, skills of adult care versus arts and crafts activities—are categorized as inherently instrumental or expressive. However, as Londoner (1990) points out, returning to Parsons (1951/1964), if the actions and behaviors of the learners themselves are the unit of analysis, any given activity may simultaneously be instrumental and expressive. In my coding, I emphasize expressive action’s moral valence, underplayed in Parsons’ translation of Weber’s ideas, but key to Weber’s original definition. While popular accounts of vocational coursework assume an instrumental orientation, I
maintain the possibility that both motivations are present within a single respondent’s account.

TWO LOGICS: INSTRUMENTAL AND EXPRESSIVE

Qualitative analysis reveals that, despite often having incorrect or incomplete information, many students use what appears to be rational calculation to understand and revise their educational plans over time. However, economic valuation is not the only force at play in students’ educational decision-making. In addition, the moral valuation embodied in expressive educational logic helps us understand high rates of aspiration and persistence over long time horizons. While instrumental logic leads some students to revise their educational plans, expressive logic complicates the equation. When college persistence is really about the kind of person the student is, roadblocks offer respondents further opportunities to dig in and prove themselves deserving of the respect due to young women striving for a better life.

*Instrumental Education*—“I’m going to be a nurse.”

Nearly all of the young mothers in this study pursued nominally vocational postsecondary programs, taking courses in fields such as nursing assistance, pharmaceutical technology, early childhood education, and business administration. This type of enrollment is largely what we would expect from a population of older, academically and economically disadvantaged students. Indeed, the majority of interviewees (71 of 100) included an *instrumental* logic of education when discussing their college aspirations and notions of adult success. In Instrumental Education, the value of college is understood in its support of economic stability and particular career
goals. For instance, many respondents hoped to be a nurse technician, a job that requires particular coursework and technical certification.

Thirty-one year old Shawna uses instrumental logic to describe her educational goals. Shawna’s schooling was interrupted while she was displaced to Detroit for a year following the hurricane, where she lived with her two children and extended family members while her husband returned to work in New Orleans and rebuild their home. When she returned to New Orleans, she re-enrolled at Delgado, continuing her previous work towards an associate’s degree in accounting.

Interviewer: What field do you study?
Shawna: Accounting. Actually, my interest isn’t in accounting, but like CSI, detective work. But I am good with numbers. I know that I can find a job in accounting. I am looking at job opportunities around here, and that’s the field. In accounting, as long as there is money, there is a job for me. That’s how I look at it. In order for me to get a job, I need to look at a field that’s in demand.

Shawna’s main priority is investing in education to improve her job prospects. She draws a distinction between her actual “interests” and her current degree program, but prioritizes the decision that she feels will lead to a steady job in the local area. While Shawna continued with her original educational plan following the hurricane, other respondents used instrumental logic to revise their plans over time. In the three semesters that she attended the study institution between high school and the hurricane, 25-year old Cherise switched fields several times:

Interviewer: How come you only did one semester after high school?
Cherise: I wanted to work. I was, I guess, being dumb. Because I wish I would have done school and gotten it over with. Whereas now I’m school online, and it just makes my life so complicated. Being a mom and a wife and working and going to school, it just makes my schedule crazy.

Interviewer: When you went back for Opening Doors, what did you study?
Cherise: Different fields. I first started out learning telecommunications. And after that, what did I switch to? I know I did respiratory therapy, but I don’t really like germs. I don’t like people coughing around me, so that wasn’t a field for me. Then I switched to business, which is what I’m studying now.

Cherise used her early college experiences to try out different potential career paths, switching several times until she found one that fit with her interests. All of this switching stalled her progress to a degree, but she ultimately found a field that she felt matched her interests and goals. When we spoke with Cherise in Dallas a year after Katrina, she was taking online business classes at the University of Phoenix, in an attempt to balance full-time work at an insurance agency with caring for her two children. Given the stability of her current job, she reported that her education goals had changed:

Interviewer: How far do you want to go in school?  
Cherise: At first I was thinking about getting a master’s degree. Then I looked at my job; I don’t think that is necessary. With my job, I’m taking classes, a bunch of sales classes. And when I’m finished with that, I’ll take human resources classes. Where I’m working at, I can have a career there. So I may not even need a Master’s degree.

Like Cherise, students who prioritized instrumental logic were willing to switch fields of study until they found what felt like a good career fit. They also revised their goals downward without much apparent distress. Many reported moving from coursework towards an associate’s degree to shorter technical certification programs for instrumental reasons. Instrumental logic did not always pan out, as some students were left disappointed with their inability to find a job in the field afterwards. Students whose technical training had not yet generated the economic returns they hoped for fall into two persistence groups: those with no further plans to continue their education and those who plan to “Start Again” in a different field with perceived better career prospects.
Expressive Education—“I’m Going to Be Somebody”

While it would be easy to assume instrumental logic from students in nominally vocational programs, qualitative data reveal another important logic of higher education in this population: what I term the expressive logic for pursuing a college degree (employed by 52 of 100 respondents). While instrumental logic supports pursuit of a particular career, expressive education represents a student’s striving to “be somebody.” Placing the emphasis at the level of the self is not accidental. As respondents using expressive logic discussed their educational histories and goals, moral status as a student allowed them to (1) distinguish between themselves and others who are content to be dependent; (2) between themselves and their families of origin; and (3) between times when life was running smoothly and times when it was not.

As the women discuss their educational journeys, what it means to be an adult, and what they consider markers of success, “finishing school” or “earning a degree” are mentioned alongside other milestones of middle-class status to which they aspire: owning a house, holding a professional job, and making enough money to take an occasional vacation. Given the original Opening Doors study population—young mothers on the cusp of poverty—the fact that the women express desire for more stable economic lives is unsurprising. But, a sign of the perceived link between education and moral status is that many respondents described how a college degree is a sign of “being somebody,” specifically somebody who is not dependent on public assistance or limited to low-wage work at Wal-Mart or in food service. Felicia, who had her first child at age 15, offered a comment representative of this attitude:

Interviewer: What’s success for you, at 28?
Felicia: Success? Earning my degree would be the success point in my life. As soon as I can, you know, achieve that goal, everybody on the outside looking in, they [will] look at me as being successful because I’m the girl that was supposed to be nothing. According to everybody in the community, I was supposed to be nothing because I had a baby early so I was going to drop out of school, I was going to be a loser, I was going to have another kid. I was supposed to fail. I was supposed to be on drugs maybe. Like all the little girls laughed at me. I don’t know. It was just everything was negative, but if anybody would say anything negative about me I used that to fuel myself and I turned it around. So once I can achieve that goal of graduating from college and having my degree, I think that I’ve reached that point. Right now I consider myself as a loser.

At the time of this interview, our second with Felicia, she reported that her husband had been cheating on her. As she was about to leave him, he suffered a stroke that left him permanently disabled. She was caring for him and their three children full time and the family lived on disability insurance payments. When her husband had the stroke, Felicia was attending the local community college working on general education requirements for an associate’s degree in psychology, but her caring responsibilities led to two Fs for the semester, making her ineligible for continued financial aid. She still hoped to find the money she needed to pay off her outstanding debts and return to school in order to earn the degree that would help others see her as a winner.

Many other respondents also spoke passionately about how completing their education would allow them to “be somebody.” At the time of our interview, Renata was 27 and had just been promoted from part-time to full-time work with benefits. She enjoyed working with kids as a cashier in a middle school cafeteria. Nonetheless, she saw this as a job rather than a career, and planned only to work in the cafeteria until it was time for her clinical experience as a surgical tech: “Once I have to do my clinical with my major, that’s my two week notice,” she reported. When asked about her likelihood of achieving her goals, Renata utilized expressive logic, focusing her
comments on the symbolic meaning of being a surgical tech rather than any particular interest in working in a hospital:

Interviewer: How realistic is it to get the AA9?  
Renata: Oh, it’s real. It’s real. I have my mind set on it. And I don’t think at this time nothing is going to stop me. Nothing is not going to change me.  
Interviewer: There aren’t any obstacles that could get in the way?  
Renata: No. I don’t care if I become cripple I’m going to wheel in there in a wheelchair. I’m going to become a surgical tech and that’s my goal in life. Because I want my children to have things that I didn’t have when I was younger. So for me to do that I have to become somebody. And I don’t want to be no cafeteria worker all my life working in a cafeteria for all my life. I don’t want to do that. I want to, you know, be somebody.

Renata’s particular language for her likelihood of completion—“Nothing is not going to change me”—reveals the degree to which her educational goals are linked to her very understanding of herself. To the point of scraping together her own money when financial aid was blocked, Renata went to great lengths to act in accordance with her vision of herself as someone who will make it. Not merely a childhood dream, this vision persisted to her late 20s, as did her attempts to make it to a job, like surgical technician, that a somebody might hold.

Beyond signifying continued aspirations for a middle class life, respondents used the expressive logic for education when discussing the differences between themselves

9 Note that a surgical technician certification is not actually an Associate’s degree. Frequently throughout the interviews, respondents misidentified the type of credential they sought, conflating vocational certificates with more academic degrees. One respondent, when asked what degree she would ultimately like to attain, responded: “What’s the highest? A Doctor? I mean, I guess, with Refrigerator and AC Repair, I could probably stop with being a Master of that.” Several respondents also appeared mistakenly to believe that completing a technical course would qualify them for a specific job. Many of these jobs, particularly in health fields, require clinical hours in the field and/or certification exams before respondents would be allowed to hold employment-for-pay.
and the families or neighborhoods in which they were raised. At the time of her interview, about four years after Katrina, 24 year-old Michelle worked as a customer service representative at a Verizon store and attended a Houston community college for an AA in Business Administration. Michelle, a single mother of one, had attended three other colleges since high school graduation: two semesters for nursing at Nichols State, a four-year Historically Black College; three semesters at Delgado; and six months at Sanford-Brown, a multi-site for-profit technical institute that turned out to be “just, like, a rip-off. It was one of those business colleges where you be in there for 18 months or whatever amount of months and you're supposed to get your degree. Right.” She had yet to complete any credentials, though the developmental courses from her time at the Nichols State did transfer to Houston. Michelle reflected on how her understanding of success had changed with her move to Texas, re-invigorating her desire to earn a bachelor’s degree:

Interviewer: And how do you define success for someone your age?
Michelle: I guess success could be defined differently depending on the person and where they came from. I say that because, as far as success for me and where I came from, I'm successful because I -- because I'm holding down a job, a decent job. I'm attending school. I pretty much take care of my household responsibilities, lights not getting cut off, not getting any eviction notices. I mean, so where I'm from that would be success in their eyes.

Interviewer: So for you, that's success?
Michelle: For me, personally, since I've seen different, I would have to say no. For me, success probably would be me finishing college, finishing school -- not just the community college that I go to, going to a university, getting my bachelor's, owning my own house, making the money that I need to make to be able to not just maintain my household but to also say, well, if we want to go take us a trip, take us a trip. Just being emotionally stable, mentally stable, being able to handle things without having to think twice about it. That would probably be success for me.

Interviewer: Do you feel like your definition has changed over time?
Michelle: Definitely. Definitely, because I mean right now where I am now, like I said, it would probably be considered success. You know, I'm doing what I didn’t see a lot of people do before around me. Graduating from high school was considered an accomplishment, but for me I see that is just standard now. But then I was like, oh yeah, I graduated [from high school]. Oh, that's it. But now it's like, I look at things different.

Michelle explicitly uses her pursuit of education to draw a boundary between the life she knew in New Orleans and the one that she is working to build in Houston. At the time of our interview, Michelle had completed her general education requirements and was halfway through with the required courses for her Business major. It seemed that, despite her rocky schooling history, she was finally on her way to a degree. Like Michelle, many other respondents utilized expressive logics of education to narratively distinguish between times that life was running smoothly and times it was not.

Desiree has been trying to get back to school since she became pregnant at 15 and left the 10th grade. As a teenager, she took a course for a hairdressing certification, but failed the written portion of the licensure exam. One day, as she ate lunch at McDonalds, the YMCA was signing people up for a GED course. She was under the impression that attending the course would earn her the GED, but she was unable to pass the test, again leaving her without a credential. In May 2004, Desiree was randomized into Opening Doors to take remedial courses, but she didn’t end up “getting it together” to enroll until Fall 2005, the semester that Katrina struck. At the time of our interview (age 24), Desiree was separated from her drug-addicted husband, struggling with depression, and abusing over-the-counter medicines. She braided hair out of her home to make money as she waited to hear back on her welfare application. Over the course of her interview, Desiree repeatedly contrasted how she felt during the semester she was enrolled in college to the “sad state” of her current life.
Interviewer: Your semester at Delgado was your first in trying to go to college?
Desiree: Yeah. I was so proud of myself. I did everything right, too, as far as financial aid, Pell grant. I did everything by myself. I took my time, and I did it. And then when I got in there, oh, my goodness, I was just so proud. And then the hurricane happened, I- you know, it messed up a lot of things for a lot of people.

Interviewer: But I think going to Delgado, is it a pride thing? Like wanting to be in a college setting other than an adult education program?
Desiree: As long as I’m going to school, I wouldn’t care if the school sat on the side of a corner store. It’s definitely not - when it comes down to that, it’s definitely not a pride issue. I wouldn’t care, you know, if it’s community college or if it’s…it doesn’t matter. Education is education.

Interviewer: So what’s the degree that you want to get? An associate’s degree or…
Desiree: I want a bachelor’s.

While it may appear that a bachelor’s degree is out of Desiree’s reach, in this discussion with our interviewer, she makes a claim about the type of person she’d like to be, links that aspiration to the idea that “education is education,” and describes the powerful emotion she attached to the (fleeting) moment when she was enrolled in college and her dreams seemed within her grasp. In fact, she passed up a ride out of New Orleans because she didn’t want to miss the first day of community college orientation, held the Friday before Hurricane Katrina hit. Since her post-Katrina return to New Orleans, Desiree has attempted to re-enroll at the community college, but enough time has elapsed that she needs to retake the placement test and figure out financial aid anew.

In the context of other challenging life circumstances, she is unsure when she will be able to return to school, though she holds fast to the aspiration. If Cooling Out is about reconciling aspirations and likely outcomes, Desiree’s lack of progress towards her goal cannot be understood as Cooling Out.
The Relationship Between Logic and Persistence Pathway

Is there a relationship between the educational logic respondents use to describe their college careers and the type of pathways they pursue? With the caution that some of these cells represent small numbers of respondents, in Table 4.1 I report the percent of respondents using each logic that reported the various persistence pathways in Chapter 3.

Table 4.1. Relationship Between Educational Logic and Persistence Pathway in Interviews (N=101)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logic</th>
<th>Instrumental</th>
<th>Expressive</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Degree (%)</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop Out (%)</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start, Start Again (%)</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>28.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stopped Out (%)</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>28.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (%)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main relationship represented is this: Instrumental logic is largely associated with one of two outcomes: either traditional stopping out with a plan to return to a similar program or dropping out entirely. Instrumental thinkers were half as likely to have a college career marked by Start, Start Again as were Expressive thinkers. In contrast, those respondents who relied most heavily on an Expressive logic of education were far more likely to have a pathway that looks like “Start, Start Again” than those with some Instrumental orientation.

In reporting these associations, I don’t want to suggest that a respondent’s logic causes the pathway described. Rather, I contend that these culturally-based logics both enable future plans and help respondents make narrative sense of their pattern of college attendance so far. For respondents who prioritized the moral valence of college attendance and completion in our interviews, setbacks offer another opportunity to Start Again, proving that they are the type of person who will complete a college degree. For
those who describe their college-going primarily in instrumental terms—attending for the perceived career benefits—setbacks are interpreted either as a reason to end the pursuit of a degree, or to pick up where they left off at a point in time where life is more amenable to successfully attending school.

**DISCUSSION: UNDERSTANDING PERSISTENT ASPIRATION**

I find that disadvantaged students’ aspirations for a college degree are not easily shaken, even in the context of the substantial difficulties they face in achieving them. For the women in this study, the process of “valuing” a college degree is more complex than suggested by the Cooling-out Hypothesis, which predicts that students who experience challenges will be easily dissuaded from continuing in school. While the few previous studies to measure changing aspiration over time suggest its resilience, little qualitative research has studied the cultural logic of persistent aspiration. Using interview data collected from a group of young, low-income mothers, I show how the moral value of a college degree is an important factor in low-income mothers’ educational decision-making. Though the instrumental logic of vocational training is present in most of these young women’s minds, for many, attending college also serves an expressive function, allowing them to construct and enact a narrative of upward mobility despite the mounting evidence that their middle class aspirations will not come easily.

This work contributes to a growing literature on the importance of understanding the cultural context in which students form aspirations and make educational decisions. To this point, Frye (2012) concludes that Malawian schoolgirls’ educational “aspirations should be interpreted not as rational calculations but instead as assertions of virtuous identity” (2012:1565). Unlike in Frye’s account of rural Malawi, however, I find that
economic rationality is certainly in the minds of low-income American adults. They firmly believe that educational pursuits will provide them the skills they need to escape low-wage work. To the extent that larger cultural discourses about education are included in recent accounts of unlikely college aspiration in the United States, the discussion is usually limited to the College for All regime (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2002; Reynolds et al. 2006; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006). And, indeed, the popular logic of College for All is largely instrumental: there, the primary purpose of a college degree is for individuals to get better jobs and for the country to remain economically competitive in an international context. If instrumental logic were all that was at play, perhaps we would observe more Cooling Out of aspirations over time in these data.

However, for this sample of young women—seeking dignity and economic stability in an era of declining public social support—more is at stake. Here, building on Frye, I find that the expressive value of being a student allows the young women to maintain the image of morally-worthy strivers. While Hurricane Katrina required, for many, a literal rebuilding of their homes and lives, these young women have long needed to build and rebuild a sense of self in the face of the struggles that accompany teenage motherhood and poverty. Given this, it’s not hard to see why aspirations for a college credential are less easily frustrated than a purely instrumental logic would predict. This study of educational aspirations and decision-making offers a prime example of how moral and non-moral logics coexist as individuals form and pursue their goals (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013). The instrumental and expressive logics of education are constructed in the context of economic uncertainty, low-wage work, and aspirations for economic stability.
These logics are then deployed by respondents to organize their narratives of young adulthood, allowing them to construct a culturally meaningful pathway out of insecurity and towards perceived independence.

What is the consequence of the persistent unmet aspirations for a college degree I describe in the previous two chapters? In the not-so-distant past, it would have been difficult for many of the study participants to convert their aspirations into action, so perhaps they were truly “cooled out.” Over the past 15 years, however, the rapid growth of for-profit education providers and distance learning programs has expanded the set of options for busy working adults. The women in this study report encountering advertisements for these programs on billboards and city busses, on television and radio commercials, and even between submitting job applications on Monster.com. The combination of economic necessity and the moral valence of a college degree make respondents vulnerable to exploitation by predatory institutions. For comparison, two years of tuition and fees at Delgado is about $7,800 compared to over $22,000 at University of Phoenix-Louisiana (calculated on 5/3/2015 using NCES College Navigator). For-profit options can cost up to fifteen times the local community college for tuition and fees (Deming, Katz and Goldin 2012), requiring large student loans that cannot be discharged even in bankruptcy. At the same time, these programs offer students new opportunities to envision possibility in the midst of struggle.

By using longitudinal mixed-methods data to understand the aspirations and decision-making of older college students, this study offers timely insight into the experiences of a growing student population that is largely overlooked in studies of educational aspiration and attainment in the United States. Clark’s (1961) Cooling-out
Hypothesis was about the structural conditions that placed community colleges at the center of a subjective process, where students reconcile cultural attitudes of limitless ambition with the reality of limited opportunity. Fifty years later, students are no longer “Cooled-out” in the community college, if they ever really were.

I find that the evolving open door college landscape feeds into a continued sense of possibility: despite failure, when the door at one institution closes, there is always another open door to walk through. The American stratification system has long been perceived as a comparatively open regime of contest mobility, full of perceived second chances for improved social and economic status (Turner 1960). Contrary to concerns that aspiration is easily frustrated, the data in the previous two chapters suggest that the contemporary open door college landscape is simply the latest instantiation of the contest regime. In the next chapter, I will combine these insights to consider more fully how the appeal of these educational logics and institutional opportunities are embedded in the broader context of respondent’s transition to adulthood. For whom is instrumental logic most appealing? And which students are most likely to prioritize expressive motivations for continued aspiration?
CHAPTER 5.
COLLEGE PERSISTENCE IN THE LONG TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

In the previous two chapters, I have established that even very disadvantaged students display remarkable overall levels of college persistence, often across many enrollment spells and institutions and long into adulthood. I have described the culturally-embedded logics that these economically vulnerable young mothers use to explain their desire for a college degree, arguing that the intertwining of economic necessity and moral imperative drive many of them, even those who have struggled mightily, to continue to dream of and pursue a degree. In this chapter, I will use an integrated analysis of survey and interview data to document the relationship between respondent’s pathways along the unfolding transition to adulthood and the meaning they attach to a college degree.

First, I merge my qualitative data coding on to the survey data to explore which types of students prioritize expressive logic. Interview respondents are grouped into three categories by the prevailing educational logic used in their interviews: instrumental (40%), expressive (32%), or mixed (28%). I find that a purely expressive logic appears most frequently among the young women who have experienced the most difficult life course trajectories over the course of the study. When directly asked, many respondents report that having their first child marked their subjective achievement of adulthood (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Silva and Pugh 2010). However, as the other normative milestones—reliable romantic partners; residential stability; steady, well-paying work—elude them, educational goals allow respondents to construct and enact a narrative of agency and future progress. In contrast, respondents who have achieved more of the
milestones to adulthood—residential stability, romantic partnership, and employment stability—are more likely to discuss education in primarily instrumental terms, assessing the meaning and value of education in morally neutral, cost-benefit discussions of increased likelihood of job success.

**ANALYSIS PLAN**

I integrate survey and interview data from each interview respondent to examine the relationship between educational narratives and the respondent’s (a) baseline demographics and (b) life course trajectory over the longitudinal survey timeline. While most interview studies of cultural logics use cross-sectional data to posit relationships between constructs of interest, the RISK Project’s longitudinal, nested design allows me to examine interview responses within the context of life course events reported over time in the survey. This allows me to examine the relationship of milestones themselves with the narrative tools employed by respondents. With interview data alone, the two may be conflated by the respondent. In this chapter, I experiment with two analytic approaches for integrating survey and interview data at the person level to document the relationship between difficult trajectories to adulthood and the narrative power of expressive logic. While mixed-methods analysis is increasingly fashionable, sociologists are just beginning to explore ways to triangulate different types of data and integrate them in an argument. This chapter is thus as much an exercise in mixed-methods data analysis as it is about the empirical findings.

In the first section, I link the qualitative coding reported in Chapter 4 to quantitative survey measures. I merge my coding of respondents’ educational logics
from interviews—instrumental, expressive, or mixed—on to their longitudinal survey responses. While respondents frequently intertwined logics in their discussion of education, for the purpose of joining qualitative coding and survey data I am required to determine whether their logic is primarily instrumental, primarily expressive, or a relatively even mixture of the two. In the second section of this chapter, I re-introduce nuance by selecting cases to reexamine in-depth. After identifying each respondent’s primary logic, I report survey data by interview logic to examine differences among the logic groups. This strategy allows me to match the ways that respondents discuss education in life course interviews to survey-based evidence of their differing experiences in the transition to adulthood. I report the linked interview and survey data at two times: baseline, and summary measures of longitudinal survey responses across the four survey waves.

In the second section, I move beyond documenting the relationship between single variables and educational logic to purposefully select respondents who cluster at the far ends of the group’s experience: respondents’ survey responses drive the selection of a subset of interviewees for in-depth examination. Here, my analysis moves in the opposite direction, from survey to interview. I use the longitudinal survey data to summarize respondents’ life course pathways over the course of the study: did they get married or divorced; move from unemployed to employed; move out of their parents’ home or back in with their parents? Using a strategy of “extreme case selection” (Caracelli and Green 1993), I identify the longitudinal survey respondents whose pathways represent (a) the most progress towards normative markers of adulthood and (b) the ones whose journeys reflect the stalled and reversible pathways to adulthood.
characteristic of economically vulnerable populations. I then examine these two groups of interviews for differences in narrative role that education plays in their interviews. The strategy of extreme case selection provides the most demographic variation between respondents, documenting the range of respondents’ experiences over the course of the study.

I look to these types of triangulation to examine the depth of a relationship that emerged from qualitative analysis of secondary data, reported in Chapter 4. Given that the RISK data were not designed and collected to establish the relationship between education and other life course achievements, I do not have the luxury of modifying the interview schedule to probe emerging themes, as would be the case in a traditional interview project. Instead, in this chapter, I exploit the mixed methods data to set up a series of confirmatory tests, capitalizing on its longitudinal nature to firmly establish that respondents make sense of their educational options and understand the value of college-going in the context of their broader experience of the transition to adulthood. As noted by Elder and Geile (2009:8) “transitions are a part of a life trajectory that gives them meaning.” In this chapter, I ground the meaning of one particular transition—returning to college—within respondents’ otherwise varied trajectories towards independent adulthood.

**USING INTERVIEW CODING TO EXAMINE SURVEY DATA**

Based on my analysis of qualitative data alone, I propose that expressive logic has particular power for those respondents who have made the least progress towards markers of normative adulthood. If this is true, then we should observe differences among the
logic groups in terms of major adulthood milestones—romantic partnering, establishing an independent household, and employment stability. In the following sections, I test whether this is the case at two time points: at baseline, and using measures of survey-based trajectory over the course of the study.

Baseline Differences Among Logic Groups

What are the demographic characteristics of respondents who adopt instrumental, expressive, or mixed logics? In Table 5.1, I report baseline survey demographics for interview respondents by the educational logic they employed in interviews. By-and-large, the findings support a hypothesis that instrumental and expressive logics are associated with respondents’ demographic characteristics and are distinct from one another. When considering the evidence in Table 5.1, it is important to remember that, due to the requirements of the Opening Doors scholarship, study participants were a highly selected, relatively homogenous, and comparatively disadvantaged group as a whole. This means that there is some demographic overlap between the logic groups. Notably, there is no difference in mean age (~25 years old), number of children (~1.7), or household size (~3.5 members) between the three groups. However, there is also a suggestion of group differences even at the beginning of the study. The substantive differences discussed in the text are highlighted in Table 5.1 with grey shading.

Respondents who discussed their educational goals and plans in purely instrumental terms are those who report the highest occurrence of the markers of traditional adulthood at the beginning of the study. Aside from having children, they are also the most likely of the three groups to be living with a romantic partner. Instrumental
thinkers also reported more indicators of financial independence at baseline: they were
the least likely of the three groups to depend on their parents for more than half of their

Table 5.1. Baseline Demographics of Interview Respondents by Educational Logic (N=101)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Instrumental</th>
<th>Expressive</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age at baseline</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES of Origin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother attended some college</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father attended some college</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First in family to attend college</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline Educational Experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular High School Diploma</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous College Credits</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled for Degree (AA or Transfer)</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline Household Composition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Number of Children</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Household Size</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with Partner</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline Economic Resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depend on parents for &gt;50% of financial need</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Benefits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSI</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash Assistance</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Stamps</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Housing</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Benefits</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Optimism (standardized)</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Human Capital Belief Index (standardized)</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: RISK Project baseline survey, limited to nested interview respondents. Interview-based coding of educational logic. Note: figures are proportions, unless marked as a mean. Cells discussed in text are denoted by shading.
financial needs; the most likely to be employed; and the most likely to report that they did not receive any of the listed public benefits.

In contrast, the respondents who discussed education using only expressive terms—focusing on the moral valence of college-going and earning a degree—were those who were most likely to report public benefits use as they enrolled in Opening Doors. Expressive thinkers were two to three times as likely as the other groups to be receiving unemployment benefits as they began the study. Important for my argument that educational aspiration and enrollment are used by expressive thinkers as destigmatizing, respondents who primarily used expressive logic were also over twice as likely as instrumental thinkers to be receiving cash assistance, arguably the most stigmatized of the benefit types. In line with the association between expressive thinking and Starting Again reported in Chapter 4, expressive thinkers were the most likely group to have previous college credits at baseline, meaning that Opening Doors was not their first engagement with higher education.

Finally, respondents who interweaved expressive and instrumental logic in their interview-based accounts of college-going were distinct from the other two groups in their relative educational advantage. They were the most likely of the three groups to have completed a regular high school diploma as opposed to a GED and the least likely to be the first in their families to go to college. Those who mixed educational logics were more likely than the other two groups to be financially dependent on their parents as they began Opening Doors, a marker used for defining “traditional college students” in the community college literature.
The final two measures reported in Table 5.1 help illuminate important
differences among the logics themselves. First, we might think that expressive logic—
the idea that, as Desiree expressed in Chapter 4 “education is education,” and completion
of a degree will solve one’s employment challenges—was simply optimism. Evidence
suggests this is not the case. Those who combined instrumental and expressive logics
reported higher psychological measures of optimism than the other two groups, about .2
of a standard deviation more. Interestingly, there was no difference between instrumental
or expressive thinkers in terms of generalized optimism.

The second confirming indicator of differences among the logics is a measure that
I call the Human Capital Belief Index, which suggests that respondents who use
instrumental logic are more likely than those who are purely expressive to believe that
educational and employment success are directly related. This measure is the
standardized sum of responses to four for-category likert scale items. The question,
asked at baseline, reads: “People have different attitudes about whether or not school
pays off. Please use the following scale to indicate your opinion: (a) Achievement and
effort in school lead to job success later on. (b) They say that getting an education helps
you get a good job, but it hasn’t worked that way for people I know. (c) No matter how
well educated you are, it’s hard for people to get a good job. (d) People like me have a
chance of making it if we do well in school.” Items b and c were reverse-coded for
construction of the scale. The unstandardized scale mean for interview respondents
(N=101) was 8.9 out of 12. Here, we see a .4 standard deviation difference between
respondents using instrumental or mixed logic and those who only discuss education in
expressive terms. The association between survey-based measures of a respondent’s
belief in the power of human capital and her interview-based educational logic offers some triangulated evidence of actual differences between instrumental and expressive logic.

*Life Course Milestones Over Time*

Next, I move from baseline differences between logic groups to examine whether there is an association between educational logic and survey-based life course trajectories over the course of the study. While the analysis of baseline data above documents demographic differences between the groups at the beginning of the study, variation in the timing and achievement of life course milestones helps to identify the consequences of relatively early or late events (Elder 1999) on how individuals construct narrative meaning. Here, I examine the relationship between educational logic and the achievement or reversal of traditional adulthood milestones over the four waves of the study. To summarize respondents’ trajectories, I focus on survey-based measures of the major milestones of traditional adulthood that have substantial variation among the respondents: residential independence, romantic partnering, and steady employment. All four waves of survey data were considered in constructing the summary variables; in the case that an interview respondent missed a survey wave, her summary category was derived from the basis of the available information.

Summary definitions of the categories are reported in Figure 5.1. Respondents were assigned to one of the following four categories for each adulthood milestone: Not Achieved; Disorderly or Reversed; Delayed; or Achieved. Respondents were categorized

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10 Summaries do not include completion of education or home ownership due to the low levels of achieving these two milestones among respondents. All respondents, by definition, were parents.
as “Not Achieved” if they did not report the milestone at any point in the survey. They were categorized as “Disorderly or Reversed” if (a) they bounced back and forth between reporting the milestones across survey waves, or (b) they had attained the milestone at baseline but lost it over time. They were categorized as “Delayed” if they did not report the milestone at baseline but reached it by the end of the study. Finally, a respondent was categorized as “Achieved” if she reported the milestone at all survey waves. Figure 5.2 reports the proportion of respondents falling into each of the categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not Achieved</th>
<th>Disorderly or Reversed</th>
<th>Delayed</th>
<th>Achieved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Residential Independence</strong></td>
<td>Household included non-nuclear family at all waves</td>
<td>Household sometimes included non-nuclear family</td>
<td>Gained residential independence</td>
<td>Lived in own household, all waves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Romantic Partnering</strong></td>
<td>No cohabiting romantic partner, all waves</td>
<td>Unstable cohabiting partnerships</td>
<td>Gained a cohabiting romantic partner</td>
<td>Cohabiting partner, all waves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment Stability</strong></td>
<td>Not employed, all waves</td>
<td>Unstable employment</td>
<td>Gained employment</td>
<td>Employed, all waves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.1. Definition of Life Course Milestone Summary Categories

Based on the data reported in Figure 5.2, it is clear that, for many respondents, the transition to adulthood in the context of Katrina was marked by instability and delay. Residential independence was the milestone that was most likely attained by the conclusion of the study. Fifty-five percent of respondents established their own household—including only themselves, their children, and a romantic partner if applicable—by two years after Katrina, even if they had lived with non-nuclear family members prior to the hurricane. Half of respondents were cohabiting with a romantic partner by the study’s conclusion, but romantic partnering was also the milestone that was most likely to never be attained: about one-quarter of respondents did not live with a
romantic partner at any point during the study. And, reflecting the significant barriers to steady employment for populations such as those in the RISK study, employment was the milestone that was the most disorderly or reversible for respondents: 41% reported uneven employment across the survey waves, though 39% were employed at the study’s conclusion.

![Figure 5.2. Summary of Life Course Trajectory for Three Milestones (N=101)](source: RISK Project longitudinal data)

Is this summary categorization of respondents’ pathways on the transition to adulthood associated with their reasons for attending college? In Table 5.2, I report the proportion of each logic group that falls within each categorical measure of the three milestones. I also report statistics on college persistence at the final survey wave and wage growth over the course of the study. It appears that this set of measures is slightly less successful in discriminating among the logic groups than was baseline demographic
difference. This could be because, in the context of broadly disorderly transitions, survey-based snapshots-in-time are noisy measures. It could also be due to the low number of respondents in some of the categories. Nonetheless, there are a few differences among the three groups worth mentioning, which are denoted by shaded cells. Instrumental thinkers are the most likely of the groups to maintain residential independence and employment stability over the course of the study. They are also the group that saw the largest wage growth from baseline to the second post-Katrina follow-up, an average increase of $4.52 an hour for respondents reporting wage data at both time points. Those who think of education in purely instrumental terms are also twice as likely as the other groups to fall into the “Disorderly or Reversed” category of residential independence, and less likely than the other two groups to have not achieved residential independence at all.

On most measures, expressive thinkers appear to be similar to the sample average. The only substantial difference is that they are 13 points less likely than the other two groups (about 80%) to have experienced a disorderly or reversed romantic pathway through the study. Aside from the difference in distribution of romantic trajectories, expressive thinkers were 10 points more likely than instrumental and 20 points more likely than respondents using mixed logics to be enrolled at the time of the final interview. This higher level of college enrollment and persistence among expressive thinkers is also reported in Chapter 4.

Finally, those respondents who utilized mixed logic for persistence were more likely than the other two groups to have never been residentially independent or to

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11 This hypothesis will be examined in the next section of the chapter, where I examine clusters of extreme cases rather than differences in group proportions.
cohabit with a romantic partner at any point in the study. This, combined with the baseline data in Table 5.1 (mixed logic respondents were most likely to be financially dependent on their parents at baseline) indicates that this group is the most likely to construct educational pathways within the context of living with extended family. Here, a combination of economic imperative and status considerations combine in respondents’ discussion of education’s value.

Table 5.2. Summary Adulthood Measures by Educational Logic (N=101)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Instrumental</th>
<th>Expressive</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Residential Independence
- Not Achieved: 0.09, 0.15, 0.22, 0.15
- Disorderly or Reversed: 0.44, 0.22, 0.22, 0.30
- Delayed: 0.47, 0.56, 0.54, 0.51
- Achieved: 0.00, 0.06, 0.04, 0.04

Romantic Partnering
- Not Achieved: 0.20, 0.29, 0.32, 0.26
- Disorderly or Reversed: 0.29, 0.16, 0.29, 0.25
- Delayed: 0.27, 0.38, 0.32, 0.32
- Achieved: 0.24, 0.18, 0.07, 0.18

Employment Stability
- Not Achieved: 0.12, 0.16, 0.07, 0.11
- Disorderly or Reversed: 0.44, 0.41, 0.36, 0.41
- Delayed: 0.20, 0.28, 0.43, 0.30
- Achieved: 0.24, 0.16, 0.14, 0.19

Mean Wage Change, Baseline to 2 years post-K
- $4.52, $2.29, $0.89, $2.68

College Persistence
- Enrolled at final survey: 0.37, 0.47, 0.27, 0.37
- If not enrolled, plans in the next year: 0.82, 0.83, 0.88, 0.84

Source: RISK Project longitudinal survey, limited to nested interview respondents. Interview-based coding of educational logic. Note: figures are proportions, unless marked as a mean. Cells discussed in text are denoted by shading.

While there are some relationships of note that emerge in this section, the baseline data in Table 5.1 and trajectories towards adulthood represented by the survey data in
Table 5.2 are not conclusive of a strong relationship between *individual aspects* of the transition to adulthood and a respondent’s primary educational logic. However, there is stronger support for the argument that more stability across the realms is associated with instrumental logic, both at baseline and over the course of the study. This offers confirmatory evidence for a relationship that emerged as I outlined the logics in Chapter 4 based only upon qualitative data: expressive thinkers are more likely to be making educational decisions within a context of disorderly or reversed progress to independent adulthood. For these students, the moral valence of college-going and the promise of a degree offer a way to organize a narrative of progress towards adulthood and exert agency to achieve it. Indeed, expressive thinkers are more likely than the other groups to have been enrolled in higher education prior to joining Opening Doors and to be enrolled at the final survey, indicating their continued engagement with education over very long periods of time.

In the following section, I use these summary variables to define two groups of respondents: those who have made the most progress towards the normative milestones of adulthood and those whose pathways are the most disorderly or reversed. I will then present interview data with students in these two clusters to examine whether an association between unstable adulthood and expressive education holds up.
USING SURVEY DATA TO IDENTIFY INTERVIEW RESPONDENTS

In Chapter 4, I used qualitative analysis to define expressive education, and to identify some of the ways that expressive education is employed by respondents to assert a pathway of upward mobility in the context of general setbacks: to differentiate between themselves and their families of origin; to distinguish themselves from those who are content to be dependent; and to demarcate times when life is running smoothly and times when it is not. If this relationship is well-established in the data, we would expect to observe systematic differences in the narratives of respondents who have achieved more outward markers of adulthood and those whose pathways are marked by instability. In the previous section of this chapter, combining qualitative coding and the survey data, I find some evidence for this proposition. Below, I move beyond examining the relationship of the summary measures of educational logic to the single markers of adulthood to focus on clusters of respondents who fall into these two groups.

Here, I use survey data to select the interview respondents with the most divergent pathways, and then revisit their interviews. For each of the three adulthood measures (residential independence, romantic stability, and employment stability), I assigned respondents a numerical score for their trajectory (-1= disorderly or reversed; 0= not attained; 1=delayed; 2=attained). The sum of these scores was used to select respondents for inclusion in this part of the analysis. The average index score was 1.2 (min=-3; max=5). Respondents whose index score was 4 or 5 were categorized as “achieved adulthood” (n=15), while those whose index score was -1 or lower were categorized as experiencing “disorderly and reversible adulthood” (n=18). Two characteristics of group difference are of note: the average age of the “disorderly and reversible” group is about 3
years higher (31.4 vs 28.6) and there is less variation in their reported educational goals. While nearly all of the respondents whose pathways were the most disorderly either were enrolled in school or reported plans to return at the final survey, the group that has achieved the traditional markers of adulthood by the conclusion of the study displays more variation in persistence and aspiration. By positioning the groups relative to each other, I am able to identify pockets of meaningful variation within what appears to be a relatively homogenous group. I discuss these groups in depth below.

**Education in the Context of Achieved Adulthood**

The respondents in this group are, based upon survey data, the ones who had attained the markers of adulthood across survey waves or achieved them by the final survey. Thirty-four year old Shawna, for instance, made her decision to pursue a degree in accounting within the context of a stable and happy marriage and independent household, though raising three children on her husband’s salary alone was a struggle. When asked why she enrolled in Opening Doors, she recalls, “I had children and no family nearby, so no-one to help my husband. I saw the financial struggle we were having, and I’d like to contribute to the family.” Noting that “without an education, you don’t have a chance” for a good job, she decided to enroll in school. Recall the discussion with Shawna in Chapter 4, where she chose accounting over her “actual interest” in crime scene investigation, implementing instrumental logic in course selection in addition to her reasons for enrolling.

Like Shawna, and as hypothesized, most of the respondents in this group did not emphasize the moral valence of a degree as they discussed their college decision-making. Instead, they relayed cost-benefit decisions about whether returning to school would pay
off economically. It is important to note that instrumental logic is about the way respondents understood the terms of the decision: often, it turned out that the women in the study had poor information to begin with or that intervening circumstances would lead to a recalculation of whether the expected return was, indeed, possible. In short, instrumental logic was no guarantee that a college experience would translate into the economic stability that the respondents hoped for. In fact, given how few respondents had yet to complete a degree, the payoff was still hypothetical for the majority of the respondents.

For some instrumental thinkers, the immediate costs of completing a program dominated their discussion of college plans and prevented them from immediate plans to return. For instance, when we spoke to 29-year old Tamara, she had re-enrolled in a Texas community college and passed all the required coursework to be a Licensed Practical Nurse, but she had yet to complete the required clinical experience. “For your clinicals, you cannot work a full-time job whatsoever,” she reported. “You’ll be in the hospital probably from 6:00 in the morning until 3:00. The most they want you to work at a job is probably 20 hours a week. And nobody can live off of 20 hours a week. Especially in my situation; I got three kids at home.” Tamara lived in Houston with her fiancé and three children and worked 50 hours a week answering phones in a call center; while she dreamed of completing her nursing program, she and her fiancé were wary of taking out the loans that would be required to make ends meet while she completed the clinical requirement.

Tamara and her fiancé were aware of the requirements of her program and had planned to have money saved in time for her to complete the clinical experience, but as
they recovered from Katrina, their best-laid plans had failed. Other respondents in this group consciously decided to take a break in their studies. Rhonda, a 31 year-old mother of one, had returned to New Orleans and re-enrolled in her social work degree program after Katrina. But when she got married, she and her husband decided on a move to Dallas, despite the fact that it would mean interrupting her studies. “To finish, I would have had to stay another school year for my daughter [in New Orleans], and I didn’t want that. So I sacrificed me, of course. Moving, I said, ‘I’ll just take the lick.’ I needed her in a better school system.” At the time of our interview, Rhonda was just beginning an online degree program in psychology, as the closest degree to social work that was offered by her local community college. She hoped that psychology would be equally useful for her plans to become a social worker. And consistent with her belief in education as the best guarantee for economic success, Rhonda felt it was her responsibility to make sure that her daughter was receiving the best preparation for college possible.

*Education in the Context of Disorderly and Reversible Adulthood*

While some respondents, such as those above, were able to make steady progress towards the milestones of normative adulthood over the course of the study, others made their college decisions in the context of the disorderly or reversible attainment of these milestones. This distinction is embodied by Annabelle, who was interviewed by the RISK Project twice. At the first interview, 30 year-old Annabelle was engaged to her son’s father and slowly taking prerequisite courses towards an associate’s degree in computer networking, which she hoped would help her secure a better-paying job than her current work as a daycare teacher. Annabelle began her enrollment in Opening Doors
when the birth of her son made her “realize that I needed to continue striving for what I wanted in life,” namely a better-paying job that would allow for home ownership. At this point, she discussed her education in exclusively instrumental terms.

By our second interview, Annabelle was 32, and life had taken a turn for the worse. Her relationship with her son’s father had dissolved and she had ended her engagement. As she moved out on her own, Annabelle increased her course load, taking out student loans to help make ends meet while she pursued her associate’s degree. While she needed the financial stability associated with a technology career more than ever, the role education played in her narrative expanded to include expressive elements. “I continue to try to make myself better, looking for a career that will be able to make me stable. I believe that education is how I’m going to get it,” she reported. “I just need to continue on the path I’m going, trying to stay as optimistic as possible, stay in school and finish.” However, with the ending of her relationship and the accompanying financial strain, her education appeared to take on new meaning. Now, she felt her lack of degree acutely: “Some days I get so depressed, I feel so unaccomplished sometimes, like it’s been all this time and I ain’t got nowhere,” she said. In the context of reversible milestones and instability, Annabelle’s education went from being simply a part of her broader life plan to being a central part of how she understood herself and discussed her (perceived) lack of success.

These longitudinal interviews with Annabelle demonstrate how the meaning of education can shift over time within a single respondent’s thinking. The other respondents in this group were interviewed only once, yet by-and-large their stories suggest support for the argument that the moral valence of being a college student helps
organize a narrative of progress towards independence, despite the ability to point to outward markers of it. Recall the respondents in the previous chapter, who used expressive education to draw distinctions between themselves and their families of origin; between themselves and others who are content to be dependent on social supports; and between times when life was running smoothly and times it was not. The comparison of the students with the most-complicated pathways to adulthood to those who have had smoother paths reinforce the fact that expressive education is a powerful narrative tool to maintain agency and subjective forward movement despite many challenges.

RESPONDENTS ON THE NORMATIVE TRANSITION

Given the dissolution of traditional markers of adulthood, recent scholarly attention has turned to how young people themselves understand their experiences (Benson and Furstenberg 2007; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Silva 2012, 2014; Shanahan, Profeli, and Mortimer 2005; Waters et al. 2011). Further, researchers have noted that these pathways have long been disorderly and winding for low-income African Americans, such as the women in this study, whose institutionalized disadvantage has placed the orderly progression of traditional adulthood beyond the reach of many (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Hardaway and Mcloyd 2009). When asked directly, what do RISK respondents have to say about whether the normative transition to adulthood is a realistic option for them? And, given that none have traveled that pathway themselves, do they wish they had done things a different way? Our interviewers asked respondents these
questions at the conclusion of interviews, after respondents have discussed their own, often difficult, pathways up and to this point.

Interviewer: I’m going to say some statements to you, and you tell me what you think about them. Some people have the idea that young adults should achieve certain milestones in order. First, finish school, then get a job, set up their own home, get married and then have children. Is this realistic?

Stacey: No. It never was like that. Like my grandma had 12 children, and she didn’t do it in any order. Who did?

Interviewer: Who did? Is there anyone that did it in this order? Friends, family?

Stacey: No. No. And I went to school, had a baby. Now I’m engaged. I’m looking forward to getting my house.

Interviewer: Do you wish you had done things in a different order?

Stacey: Yeah. I don’t regret my daughter, but I probably would have maybe done a little - - I’m not going to necessarily say that order, but . . . maybe graduate high school, go to college, graduate. Get me a house.

By and large, like 24 year-old Stacey, interview respondents do believe that finishing college and attaining financial stability would have been easier had they done so before having children, but most recognize that the normative transition is not a likely pathway for the people they know. Cherise, who we met in Chapter 4, reported that “At first I thought [doing things in that order] was a part of real life, but I don’t think it works that way anymore. Well, I know it didn’t work that way for me. Some people may do it that way, but it doesn’t seem like real life to me.” Like Cherise, many respondents react to this interview question with responses that indicate that they are well-aware of the order in which young people are “supposed to” do things, but that it simply hasn’t happened that way in their own lives or for the people around them. While thirty-one year old Susan described the normative order as “everybody’s dream in high school,” she noted that “real life” was not so simple, stating “I just have to move forward from where I am.” When asked whether she believes that that the normative order is realistic for
people like her, she replied, “No, ma’am, no. I already have my child. I’m just trying to get back to school. I don’t know if I want to be married.”

Many respondents actively pushed back against a definition of adulthood that relied on the achievement of the traditional milestones. Recall Annabelle, above, whose instrumental account of education turned expressive as her relationship dissolved. When asked in the first interview whether adulthood is defined by the series of normative achievements, she was adamant it was not, interrupting our interviewer before the question could even be asked:

Interviewer: Some people think that you should become an adult by first finishing school, then getting a job, then getting married, having a kid…

Annabelle: Oh, no. I’m sorry—that’s not true at all. You need to become an adult when life is basically staring you in the face. When you see that all you have is you and some friends and family, and that becomes ‘I need to get myself together.’ It has nothing to do with the stages of finishing school, getting married or anything. From my experience, I had to become a responsible person at age 12, helping my mother with my little brother. And when I was 15 and my sister passed away, I became an auntie. Whatever life brings you, that’s when your responsibility and adulthood begin.

For respondents like Annabelle—and there are many—adult responsibilities came early. If not related to young lives lived in poverty, having children marked a turning point for many of the RISK respondents. Yet, as with Annabelle, understanding of one’s college progress and the meaning of a degree still happens within the context of this normative environment. Even if “adulthood” doesn’t require the completion of the traditional milestones in a particular order, respondents still use these markers to connote success and independence. And, as established in the previous two sections, this context shapes the way they understand the meaning and value of educational success, pointing to a
factor of college decision-making that is overlooked by studies that examine adult students’ college enrollment isolated from their broader life context.

**INTEGRATING SURVEY AND INTERVIEW DATA**

This chapter has represented an experiment in mixed-methods data analysis, in which I merged data sources in search of confirmatory evidence for a finding that was merely suggestive from qualitative analysis alone. I implemented two strategies for integrating survey and interview data on a single respondent, capitalizing on the RISK Project’s nested survey design to examine the robustness of the finding that college enrollment takes on expressive meaning for respondents who have struggled the most on their pathways to independence over the course of the study. Given that my work represents a secondary analysis of qualitative data, I did not have the luxury of probing emergent qualitative findings as the project unfolded, and instead relied on these secondary checks to establish the robustness of the conceptual relationship I posited. My experience with this exercise offers lessons for future studies that seek to integrate survey and nested interview data.

First, the utility of linking qualitative coding with traditional survey analysis is somewhat limited by the interview sample size. Even in a qualitative study as large as the RISK project—over 100 respondents—the sample is too small to run effective multivariate analyses, isolating the effects of variables controlling for other hypothesized factors. The bivariate analyses presented in the first part of this chapter are largely in line with the hypothesized relationships, but given that the interview sample was not a probability sample from the survey population, it is not possible to establish statistical significance. In short, the type of analysis that is facilitated by linking qualitative coding
to survey data is probably best understood as presented here: as robustness checks to relationships suggested by the interview data rather than useful for generating new findings.

On the other hand, the strategy of “extreme case selection” used in the second part of this chapter—where interview respondents are purposefully selected from empirical extremes of the survey data—may hold more promise for generating clear relationships in mixed-method studies. While this strategy was used as confirmatory in this chapter, it could also be a fruitful one for purposive selection of the interview candidates themselves. For instance, one could think of designing a nested interview sample where survey data were used to identify pockets of extreme cases for qualitative follow-up. If the goal was to explicitly test qualitative differences on the basis of a survey variable, focusing attention on analytic extremes may have more promise for identifying meaningful variation than selecting fewer respondents across several, less-distinct clusters. Given that sizable groups are necessary to determine meaningful differences among them, an extreme-case design may offer the most promise for testing meaningful hypotheses about the link between survey variables and qualitative differences of interest.

Finally, researchers who seek to perform secondary data analysis with qualitative data may face challenges with establishing rich and deep findings, as there is no opportunity to modify the interview protocol to probe emergent findings. While the RISK Project’s life history interviews protocol offered broad contextual information on respondents’ experiences during and after the hurricane in a variety of life domains, variation among interviewers and across interview waves required some creativity in the analytic process. This chapter’s analytic strategies demonstrate the strength of mixed-
methods analysis for overcoming some of the challenges of secondary qualitative data analysis.

EDUCATIONAL LOGIC AND THE LONG TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

In this chapter, I have used mixed-methods analyses as a robustness check for a finding that emerged from secondary qualitative analysis. By merging summary qualitative coding onto longitudinal survey data, I show that the respondents who primarily discuss instrumental reasons for attending college are making decisions in the context of more stable markers of adulthood. These respondents were more likely to be financially independent, employed, and partnered, and emphasized the expected economic returns to their college plans. Respondents who leaned most heavily on the expressive power of education—for whom returning to college represented agency, identity, and moral worth—were the most likely to face the stigmatization of public assistance and the most unstable and reversible experiences in the other major realms of normative adulthood. The moral valence attached to a college degree was evoked most often by the respondents who have experienced the rockiest pathways to adulthood, both prior to and over the course of the study. Meanwhile, students who blended the two logics were the most like traditional college students: financially dependent on family members, living with extended family, and not working for pay. For these students, both sets of goals—instrumental and expressive—drove their continued degree expectations and attendance. How many of these students will eventually graduate with a degree remains an open question, but the long timelines to degree thus far suggest rather long odds.
Students—especially non-traditional students such as those in this study—make college decisions in the context of complicated lives. Yet, up until recently, research on college decision-making has been largely limited to high school students in the initial transition to college. This chapter demonstrates that, for economically vulnerable young mothers, variation in the transition to adulthood influences the meaning of college attendance. In short, respondents who have made the least progress towards traditional markers of independent adulthood see more than just financial stability at stake in their pursuit of educational success. In some cases, it even appears that college attendance is primarily expressive. For the women who cannot point to stable romantic relationships, residential independence, or living-wage work as markers of their successful adulthood, a return to college offers an opportunity to take control of the future. In a broader context of declining social policy supports, it is also the only practical option available.

After discussing their life histories—including their experiences of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath—how do respondents use our interviews to make narrative sense of their pathways to this point? What do they anticipate for the future? The fact that expressive logic emerged in a context of interviews covering a much broader range of topics emphasizes the relationship between the economic necessity and the moral valence of a college degree. And, in a context of declining social supports for families like those in this study, a return to college represents the main plausible pathway to the economic stability they so desire. Unfortunately, as their winding college pathways indicate, success is not that simple. The most disadvantaged students enter an institutional landscape where not all schools are created equal and not all programs provide the skills required for a college degree. While it appears that, out of both
economic and moral necessity, educational optimism springs eternal for some respondents, the RISK respondents’ college pathways demonstrate that we have a long way to go before a return to college pays off for students like them.
In early March 2015, Strayer University, a for-profit educational company with over 45,000 students on 80 campuses and online, debuted a new national television commercial. In this commercial, titled “Reinvent,” comedian and celebrity talk show host Steve Harvey speaks to a room full of adults of a variety of ages and diverse skin colors. The audience members make eye contact and nod thoughtfully as Harvey makes Strayer’s Case for College:

“I cannot tell you how many decisions that I’ve made in my life that I thought was right at the time, and as I start living out those decisions, it was a bad move for me. So I’ve had to stop and reinvent myself several times. That’s what a lot of people do when they come to Strayer. They are reinventing themselves. There is no age limit to this, there is no restriction of time.”

As the commercial fades into audience clapping, text invites viewers to “See more on success at strayer.edu/successproject.” When I visit the link, I’m taken to a slickly marketed page with several sections: “Success,” “Dreams,” “Action,” “Determination,” “Growth,” and “Happiness.” It is notable, but not surprising given what I’ve learned in this study, that the admissions materials focus on aspirational personal characteristics rather than future career trajectories. Though this advertising is aimed to a different—frankly, much larger—audience than Drew Faust’s fall speech to a Texas high school, the core message of Strayer’s outreach emphasizes a similar proposition: college-going is not just about getting a better job. It is also about the type of person we want to be. And, by extension, the type of person we currently are.

Whether these messages come from think pieces crafted in the most elite corners of the higher education landscape or slick commercials promoting $30,000 associates’
degrees, the women in my study demonstrate the power of expressive education to shape their educational goals and enrollment behaviors. But what are the consequences of the combination of economic necessity, expressive logic, and the diversification of open door “opportunities” for economically vulnerable young adults? What pathways emerge as RISK Project respondents navigate their increasingly-diverse set of college choices? How do these students understand “the case for college”? And how is this understanding embedded in the broader context of the delayed, disorderly, and reversible milestones of their unfolding adult lives? These are the questions that I asked in this dissertation and address in this conclusion. As I summarized my findings in the conclusion of each chapter, I will only briefly revisit them here. I will then move on to discuss the implications of the study for scholars of American higher education and for researchers using a nested interview study design. I will conclude with some thoughts about the implications of this work for open door education and public policies to serve economically vulnerable parents.

*The Promise and Limits of Returning to School*

The women in this study, by-and-large, have had substantial difficulty establishing stable, economically independent adult lives while parenting young children and holding the low-wage jobs available to workers without a college credential. The arrival of Hurricane Katrina only underlined this instability, disrupting respondents’ lives and displacing many of them from their homes and community. Yet, when compared to nationally-representative data on highly disadvantaged college students, the RISK Project respondents display a remarkable level of continued enrollment and persistent aspiration. This finding may appear counter-intuitive, given that the majority of respondents had
been attending school for years, many without making much progress towards a degree or credential. What can explain their behavior?

Interview data reveal two distinctly different pathways traveled by students in the New Open Door Landscape. As in previous research on community college populations, some students “stop out,” taking breaks, only to return to the same institution or degree program. However, the second pattern is facilitated by the New Open Door Landscape: when at first they don’t succeed, other students “Start, Start Again,” switching programs, institutions, or delivery methods in continued search of what they hope will be a better fit and lead to success. The myriad options they face—advertised on busses, billboards, and television—allow this group of students to imagine that this time, things will be different. Further, many of the young women appear to lack the resources required to make informed choices among these options. While the group was mostly optimistic about the relationship between educational and economic success, it was not uncommon for study participants to express regret over what had turned out to be poor decisions: mismatches between the program content and their actual interests; programs that didn’t teach the skills required to pass certification exams; and student loan burdens that prevent their future return. While the New Open Door Landscape offers what appear to be countless opportunities, the resulting decoupling of persistence and completion means lost momentum, longer timelines, and, for many, increasing student debt.

In the face of mounting evidence that success will not come easy, what can explain this persistent aspiration? For this group of economically-vulnerable young parents, the intertwining of economic necessity and the moral valence of a college degree support aspirations and plans to return. Instrumentally, respondents believe that college
credentials will allow them to escape the low-wage labor market and be able to secure jobs with better working conditions. *Expressively,* a return to school allows them to distance themselves from their low-SES origins; distinguish between themselves and others who are content to be dependent; and demarcate times in life when things are running smoothly and when they are not. While many respondents include both logics in their discussion of their college pathways, some rely wholly on one or the other, which has consequences for their future educational plans. Respondents who only express instrumental reasons for attending school are most likely to either be on the way to completing or have dropped out altogether. In contrast, those who only discuss expressive reasons for attending are more likely to report plans to return in the future or pathways that look like “Start, Start Again.” For these students, prior failures represent new opportunities to dig in and try again. If education is about the type of person we want to be, a return to college offers an opportunity for these women to prove themselves worthy of the respect due to active strivers.

The logic a respondent evokes is related to the broader trajectory of her transition to adulthood. Respondents who have achieved more of the traditional milestones are more likely to report that they feel like successful adults, freeing them up to make cost-benefit analyses of their educational plans. In contrast, those whose pathways to adulthood reveal the most difficulty achieving milestones—and the respect that accompanies independence—rely most heavily on the expressive power of education to structure their personal narratives and move forward into a better future. By examining the meaning and value respondents attach to a college degree in the context of their
broader life course trajectories, I highlight the material and symbolic role of education in the contemporary American opportunity structure.

**IMPLICATIONS**

*For the Study of Diverse College Careers*

A major goal of this study was to contribute to the evolving literature on non-traditional college careers. As “traditional” college students become the minority of American college-goers, research on higher education must take into account how college pathways intersect with other aspects of the transition to adulthood (Alexander, Bozick and Entwisle 2008; Deil-Amen and DeLuca 2010; Giudici and Pallas 2014; Goldrick-Rab 2006; Roksa and Velez 2010). Yet while researchers document broad trends of college-going and aspiration extending past normative timelines, existing data sources offer limited information for capturing how students experience this change, both practically and subjectively. Large, longitudinal surveys of entering college students and data collected for institutional accountability purposes only track first-time degree-seekers. This means that, as students like Monique, Tamara, and Kelly pursue their winding pathways across multiple institutions and many years, they are excluded from existing research. The RISK Project’s unique evolution allows in-depth study of a student population that is largely overlooked in accounts of the college experience in America today. Yet, this population is vitally important for understanding how the lower end of our increasingly diverse and stratified higher education landscape operates.

Overall high levels of continued enrollment and persistent aspiration—and the qualitatively different experiences of students who “stop out” on the way to a degree
versus those who “Start, Start Again”—demonstrate the need for data that accurately reflects the New Open Door College Landscape. In particular, the comparison of survey and interview data reveals that survey questions about current enrollment and immediate plans for return are very time-sensitive for these students, who often study year-round and sit out semesters from time-to-time. The fact that a substantial proportion of respondents in the study never enrolled in their initial Opening Doors institution demonstrates the tenuous nature of educational plans for students like those in the RISK Project. If we want to continue to argue that a return to college is the best pathway to prosperity for economically-vulnerable Americans, our higher education survey questions and tracking data cannot allow these students to fall through the cracks.

Contributing to the long-standing research on open door college students and “Cooling-out,” it is clear from my findings that lack of attainment, even across long time frames, is not a sufficient proxy for leveled aspiration. At the same time, nearly all respondents to the RISK survey report that they plan to continue their education in the future. Extending insights from prior studies of high school students, the conceptual distinction between aspirations and expectations (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Vaisey 2010) should be made clear in studies of adult learners’ educational plans if we are to fully understand the implications of the changing institutional landscape of higher education for students’ chances for successful degree completion.

This work also contributes to a growing literature on the importance of understanding the cultural context in which students form aspirations and make educational decisions (Frye 2012; Hitlin and Vaisey 2013). To the extent that larger cultural discourses about education are included in recent accounts of unlikely college
aspiration in the United States, the discussion is usually limited to the College for All regime (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2002; Reynolds et al. 2006; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006). And, indeed, the popular logic of College for All is largely instrumental: by this account, the primary purpose of a college degree is for individuals to get better jobs and for the country to remain economically competitive in an international context. In this study, I have detailed the expressive functions of college attendance for a particularly disadvantaged student population. Future work should examine the expressive content of college-going in different student populations. Such work would likely identify important differences that could shed light on the American opportunity structure more broadly and how the higher education system exacerbates educational inequality.

Finally, future studies should explicitly examine the role of for-profit higher education institutions and sub-baccalaureate certificate programs in the lives of economically vulnerable families. We have much to understand about why these programs disproportionately attract disadvantaged students, the quality of the education they receive while attending, and the consequences of attendance for their economic and social outcomes. Susanne Mettler astutely concludes her political history of the emerging for-profit sector with a warning: “Each of the players involved in perpetuating this system has the wrong incentives: the owners of the for-profits want to make more money; lawmakers want to cultivate friends in the business community, collect campaign contributions, and be able to say that they’re promoting free market principles while helping the poor. Meanwhile, if for-profits continue to make the cost of student aid balloon, lawmakers may decide such programs are unsustainable and curtail them for all
students, including the majority who study at universities and colleges with far better records” (Mettler 2014:193). While there is some hint of “market correction” and regulation of the most flagrantly predatory institutions, I believe that we must think very carefully about how privatizing public goods like higher education smuggles in the exploitation of our most vulnerable citizens alongside opportunities for “flexibility” and “responsiveness” that meet disadvantaged student/consumers’ “needs.”

For Mixed-Methods Research

The RISK Project’s research design—the nesting of in-depth interviews within a longitudinal survey sample—offered an important opportunity to explore innovative methods of data analysis. While the things I tried that did not yield anything particularly useful offer enough fodder for many methodology articles, other strategies worked very well and could be replicated in future studies that integrate survey and interview data on a single respondent. Vitally important to this process was accurate and reliable qualitative coding, which required systematic efforts at data organization and reduction. The process of topical indexing and selectively retrieving data to apply analytic codes that we developed gave me the confidence I needed to merge qualitative coding onto survey data and produce results that were firmly grounded in the data. QDA software offers important opportunities to rethink the way we code and document our qualitative findings, and I believe the process outlined in Chapter 2 starts an important conversation about exploiting the features of QDA technology to improve the transparency of interview-based data analysis.

Secondary analysis of RISK’s in-depth interview data offered me many opportunities but also posed its own set of challenges. This type of work has not yet been
much explored in research methodology literature, but is important in the context of large-scale team-based research with multiple interviewers. While traditional qualitative data collection often evolves to probe emerging findings over the course of a study (and the RISK Project did this for several other sets of emerging findings), I came to the data after interviews were completed. As such, I found it very important to be clear about how I developed my argument and creative about testing and verifying my findings.

Whenever possible, I separated theory generation (writing analytic memos and developing analytic codes) from theory testing (the application of codes to the data and verification of emerging relationships). In qualitative research, the interviewer herself is a vital data collection instrument, and many researchers develop embodied or “gut” reactions about their important findings over the course of conducting interviews. I did not have that benefit here, which made me all the more concerned about getting the argument right. However, I believe that this was, in the end, a strength of this study: I did not take for granted that my findings were robust, which forced me to explore creative methods for cross-verifying them in the data. By spelling out my process of coding the qualitative data and the variety of ways I combined interview and survey data to document the relationships I discovered, I contribute to the methodological literature on interview coding and analysis.

For Open Door Education and Policies to Support Economically Vulnerable Families

The landscape of open door higher education continues to evolve. There have been some recent examples of efforts to crack down on the most flagrantly predatory recruitment and lending practices in the for-profit sector. In the summer of 2014, Corinthian Colleges, the country’s second-largest for-profit education provider, was
forced to disband when federal funding was frozen for 21 days over questions about the legitimacy of the employment statistics they reported to the federal department of education. More than a handful of the women in this study had attended schools in the Corinthian brand. At the time, the company was also under investigation related to a lawsuit for predatory lending practices from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. In the end, rather than dissolve the company and strand its student body, the government licensed sale of over half of Corinthian’s assets—including 33,000 of its enrolled students—to the Education Credit Management Corporation. This group has no prior experience in the provision of education or career training; it is a servicer of student debt. These institutions continue to change hands and rebrand in the face of difficulties, making quality information about the outcomes of enrollment difficult to establish and disseminate to the students who need it most. Nonetheless, efforts to provide this information must continue. Economically and academically disadvantaged students should not be left to navigate this emerging marketplace alone, given the large financial risks and substantial opportunity costs that college attendance demands from those who balance low-wage work and parenting with their pursuit of a degree.

In February 2015, President Obama proposed free community college for all Americans, with a goal of increasing the educational attainment of working-aged adults. This policy agenda is currently being discussed in Washington and beyond. Reducing the financial burden of attendance—moving beyond covering tuition to providing grant aid that helps students make ends meet while completing a degree—could certainly help students like those in this study. Yet, the findings presented here suggest that expanding access alone will likely not be enough to guarantee increased attainment. In particular,
the experiences of RISK Project respondents who tried to re-enroll following Hurricane Katrina suggest a need to modify institutional practices to facilitate smooth re-entry with as little bureaucratic drag across enrollment spells as possible. If we are to keep returning students on the pathway to a degree and away from a cycle of “Start, Start Again,” they will need more than just financial resources. This would likely require better counseling and advising efforts to help students identify their interests and understand the specific educational requirements of jobs that exist in their local community. While researchers of school/labor market articulation have argued for the need to develop institutional relationships between colleges and employers for at least 15 years (e.g., Rosenbaum 2001) community college experts are increasingly pushing for a fundamental redesign to community college programs and services, moving from the current “ala carte, cafeteria college” in favor of a “guided pathways” model (Bailey, Jaggers, and Jenkins 2015; Symonds, Schwartz, and Ferguson 2011). These efforts offer reasonable potential for improving the flow of information between students, schools and employers, but as federal and foundation money flows towards the establishment of these so-called “career pathways,” careful implementation and impact studies must offer important information to help establish and scale up effective partnerships.

The baseline Opening Doors study that brought the RISK students to our attention grew directly out of welfare reform and developed in the context of the tightening of cash assistance to economically vulnerable families. As the responsibility for supporting struggling families devolved from the federal government to states, and finally to students themselves securing aid in the higher education marketplace, the intertwining of the economic imperative and moral valence of education becomes even more
consequential for low-income students. While few if any of the RISK respondents would be considered middle-class at the conclusion of our study, those who have managed to make progress towards the milestones of stable adulthood are less likely to seek dignity and respect through a return—any return—to college. While, at its most effective, the American higher education system offers important possibilities for economic stability and social mobility, the findings of this study make plain that college attendance must not be our only poverty policy. We simply cannot rely on the increasingly stratified, increasingly risky marketplace of open door education alone.
APPENDIX A. CHOOSING APPROPRIATE QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS (QDA) SOFTWARE

Researchers embarking on qualitative analysis of large interview samples have several options for Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) software. For this dissertation—and the work of the larger RISK Project team—the ability to merge respondent’s answers to survey measures with interview transcripts was of central importance. In the process of determining which software would best facilitate this analytic task, I experimented with three: Atlas.ti 6/7, Dedoose, and NVivo 10. For my purposes, I decided on the last of these, and will briefly outline the rationale.

Atlas.ti is the oldest of the three QDA packages I tested, and offers basic analytic functionality for qualitative interview data. Users can code and retrieve chunks of text; use coding matrices to examine an overview of coding coverage by document; and group qualitative documents by respondent attributes such as race, gender, and age. In order to query the intersection of respondent attributes and analytic codes to generate insights and test hypotheses, Atlas.ti’s Primary Document Families can be used to group documents by respondent attribute. Classification of respondent attributes is limited in that they must be Boolean. While the assignment of PD Families could be controlled by spreadsheet import in Atlas.ti 6 and earlier, this functionality was not included in Atlas.ti 7.0. Given that PD Families are the mechanism to link survey and interview data, assigning large numbers of transcripts to Boolean categories by hand was simply not feasible. Thus Atlas.ti was ruled out for the purpose of integrated analysis.

Dedoose is an online subscription service that stores data and is accessible from any computer with an internet connection. In Summer 2012, I sent Dedoose our 130 interviews, which were coded with a topical index (see below) using Atlas.ti 6. The
document import process took several weeks and was not flawless; not all of the coding transferred accurately. On the positive side, Dedoose was specifically designed to facilitate the integration of survey and interview data. Transcript documents are assigned to rows in a Descriptor Table, and respondent attributes (columns) may be imported and exported via spreadsheet. Thus, the addition of new survey data was simple and accurate. However, as of the summer of 2012, the software interface was difficult to use with such a large set of interview transcripts. Combined with the fact that the coding import was not flawless, this option was discarded.

NVivo 10 is a QDA package designed for the analysis of data from text documents and surveys. The following characteristics made it the best choice for the purposes of integrated analysis: (1) *Straightforward linking of transcripts and respondent attributes.* Transcripts are linked to a “Classification Table,” in which data on respondent attributes may be listed, sorted, and filtered. For my purposes, I required respondent attributes coded from the interviews, such as residential location, educational attainment, employment, and marital status as of the interview. Respondent attributes also included data from the survey, such as mental health trajectory, employment history, and other important variables. As my analyses evolved, revising the categorization or importing further survey data was simple and accurate. (2) “*Invivo Coding.*” When I reduced the size of interview text by querying the topical index, it was simple to navigate these extracts and thematically code them. While code extracts become new documents in Atlas.ti, NVivo transfers the additional coding back to the original document, preserving the links between analytic codes and the respondent attributes in the Classification Sheet. This feature was crucial for the analytic process I developed and describe below. (3)
Advanced querying capability. The querying functionality in NVivo is more comprehensive and sophisticated than in the other two QDAS options. Together, these three features made NVivo 10 the appropriate software for the analytic tasks of this mixed-methods analysis.
### Table B1. Respondents Quoted in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>College Status</th>
<th>Romantic Partnering</th>
<th>Residential Independence</th>
<th>Employment Stability</th>
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<td>Disorderly/Reversed</td>
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<td>Delayed</td>
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Note: Age and life course variables measured at the second post-Katrina survey, five years after baseline
**APPENDIX B, CONTINUED**

Table B2. Interview Respondents for Chapter 5: Achieved Adulthood

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<td>Kimberly</td>
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<td>Shawna</td>
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Note: Age and life course variables measured at the second post-Katrina survey, five years after baseline

Table B3. Interview Respondents for Chapter 5: Disorderly or Reversible Adulthood

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>College Status</th>
<th>Romantic Partnering</th>
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<tr>
<td>Angel</td>
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<td>Tara</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
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<td>Lisa</td>
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Note: Age and life course variables measured at the second post-Katrina survey, five years after baseline
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